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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study of 2,378 secondary school students from 26 schools in Australia's Victoria State provided data clarifying the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of truancy. School records, a survey of the principals of 501 secondary schools, and records of the criminal justice system provided additional data. The longitudinal study involved collection of data in 1980, when the students surveyed were in their ninth school year, and followup surveys conducted in 1981 and 1983. The research on truancy examined (1) the incidence, distribution, and patterns of truant behavior; (2) school and student variables accounting for truancy patterns; (3) relationships between truant characteristics and school responses to truancy; (4) the links between truancy and delinquency; and (5) relationships between respondents' truant behavior and their experiences after compulsory schooling. This report's seven chapters cover (1) an introduction to truancy and the study; (2) the study methodology; (3) a theoretical model of truancy based on a review of the literature; (4) an examination of the scope of Victoria's truancy problem; (5) the patterns of behavior relating truancy, delinquency, and employment; (6) results of testing the truancy model; and (7) current Victorian school truancy policies and possible new directions. (PGD)

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SKIPPING SCHOOL

An Examination of Truancy in Victorian Secondary Schools

Garry Coventry
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Ron Cooke
Janet Vinall

Research Section
Victorian Institute of Secondary Education

August 1984

A Report of a Research Project supported by a Grant from the Criminology Research Council, Canberra.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education.

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Data coding was undertaken by members of the Operations Section of the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 TRUANCY: AN ISSUE OF CONCERN

1.1 Defining Truancy 1
1.2 Identifying Truants 4
1.3 Society, Youth and Truancy 6
1.4 Aims of the Study 9
1.5 Structure of the Report 11

CHAPTER 2 THE TRUANCY STUDY: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

2.1 Sources of Data 13
2.2 Measuring the Dimensions of Trouble 21
2.3 Measurement of Longitudinal Variables 24
2.4 Summary of Analytical Procedures 28

CHAPTER 3 RELATED LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRUANCY MODEL

3.1 Truancy and the Individual 31
3.2 Truancy and the Family 32
3.3 Truancy and Peer Groups 35
3.4 Truancy and the School 35
3.5 Trauncy and Contemporary Society 39
3.6 School Responses to Truancy 42
3.7 Truancy and Juvenile Delinquency 45
3.8 The Development of a Truancy Model 48

CHAPTER 4 THE INCIDENCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUANCY

4.1 The Extent of Truancy 53
4.2 Individual Characteristics and Truancy 66
4.3 Family Characteristics and Truancy 66
4.4 School Characteristics and Truancy 68
4.5 Peer Group Attachment and Truancy 78
4.6 Summary 82

CHAPTER 5 CONSEQUENCES OF TRUANCY: DELINQUENCY AND POST-COMPULSORY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

5.1 The Effects of Truancy on Juvenile Delinquency 86
5.2 The Effects of Truancy on the Years of Post-Compulsory Schooling 93
5.3 Summary 98

CHAPTER 6 EXAMINING AN EXPLANATORY MODEL OF TRUANCY

6.1 Longitudinal Data and the Truancy Model 102
6.2 The Model for Males and Females 115
6.3 Summary 117

CHAPTER 7 TOWARD NEW SCHOOL APPROACHES IN DEALING WITH TROUBLESOME BEHAVIOURS

7.1 Current School Practices and School Non-Attendance 120
7.2 Major Research Findings 122
7.3 Truancy Prevention Strategies 128

BIBLIOGRAPHY 133

APPENDIX 1 Sampling and Attrition 145
APPENDIX 2 Institutional Responses to Truancy 155
APPENDIX 3 School Attendance Records 163
APPENDIX 4 Creation of Indices 167

TABLES

Table		Page
2.1	School Characteristics of Wave 1 (1980) Sample	15
4.1	Self-Reported Truancy for Years 9 to 11	54
4.2	Official Truancy for Years 7 to 11	55
4.3	Maximum Self-Reported and Official Truancy by Gender	58
4.4	Year Level of Peak Involvement by Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported and Official Truancy	60
4.5	Maximum Official Truancy by Maximum Self-Reported Truancy in Years 9-11 Combined	61
4.6	Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Socioeconomic Status at Wave 1 (1980)	67
4.7	Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Parents' Educational Expectations at Wave 1 (1980)	69
4.8	Maximum Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by School System at Wave 1 (1980)	70
4.9	Maximum Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by School Action at Wave 3 (1983)	73
4.10	Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by School Success at Wave 1 (1980)	75
4.11	Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Attitudes to School at Wave 1 (1980)	77
4.12	Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Attitudes to Teachers at Wave 1 (1980)	79
4.13	Maximum Frequency Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Peer Group Attachment at Wave 3 (1983)	81

Table Page

5.1 Frequency of Police Contacts for Delinquent Group 86
5.2 Frequency of Police-Recorded Offences for Delinquent Group 87
5.3 Distribution of Offence Type for Delinquent Group 88
5.4 Delinquency Status by Maximum Self-Reported and Official Truancy 89
5.5 Maximum Self-Reported and Official Truancy Before and After Delinquents' First Offence 91
5.6 Labour Market and Educational Activities of the Panel at Wave 3 (March, 1983) by Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported Truancy for Years 9-11 94
5.7 Labour Market and Educational Activities of the Panel at Wave 3 (March, 1983) by Maximum Frequency of Official Truancy for Years 7-11 96
6.1 Bivariate Correlation Matrix 101
6.2 Standardised Regression Coefficients of Reduced Structural Equations With Model Variables as the Dependent Variable 103
6.3 Standardised Regression Coefficients of Structural Equations with Model Variables as the Dependent Variable 104

FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.1	Truancy in Secondary Schools	5
3.1	Referral Network for the Treatment of Truancy	43
3.2	A Simplified Truancy Model	52
4.1	Changing Patterns of Self-Reported Truancy	63
6.1	The Relationships Between Family Background and the Characteristics of Schools Attended in 1980	105
6.2	The Relationships Between Family Background, School Characteristics and Student Commitment to Schooling	106
6.3	The Relationships Between Family Background, School Characteristics, Student Commitment to Schooling and Peer Group Attachment	110
6.4	The Relationships Between All Characteristics and Truancy and Juvenile Delinquency	112

CHAPTER 1

TRUANCY: AN ISSUE OF CONCERN

Truancy, like juvenile delinquency, is generally regarded as a form of adolescent deviance and has become an issue of prominent importance in both education and social welfare areas. This is a study primarily about truancy, including its relationship to juvenile delinquency, in Victorian secondary schools.

The study should be viewed within a broad context of the educational and social difficulties (such as unemployment) which face youth in transition. This study adopts the perspective that an analysis of truancy and delinquency must focus on the importance of the school in the lives of young people. Analysis and discussion contained in this report present a case for understanding and responding to truant behaviour within a framework which emphasises an educational development (including social development) orientation for its prevention.

1.1 Defining Truancy

The advent of the Education Bill into the Victorian parliament in September 1872 and several enactments of subsequent legislation during the past century, particularly the Education Act of 1958 and the Community Welfare Services Act of 1970, have created a body of laws which make school non-attendance, without reasonable excuse, liable for further official intervention and/or action.

School non-attendance, in the earlier part of this century, appeared to be regarded as reasonably minor and excusable behaviour (see Brown, 1983). Over the past few decades, however, the literature about the non-attending student indicates that truancy has become an issue of greater concern for educational and social welfare authorities. Associated with this increased concern is a perspective that failure to attend school represents a form of deviance. It is not surprising, therefore, that students who are absent without acceptable excuse are subject to the social control practices and procedures of schools, welfare agencies and the justice system. How one views the causes and problems of school non-attendance will largely determine the policy and program responses of these social institutions.

Definitions of what truancy is, and what constitutes a truant, abound. More often than not, terms are confused and the words become all encompassing labels rather than usable definitions. In the apt words of Williams (1974:97): 'Truancy is a phenomenon difficult to define and even more difficult to measure with any degree of accuracy'. Denne (1981) has underscored these problems of definition and measurement of truancy:

> '... there are so many ways to truant. Many are not obvious enough to make a clear-cut count. Some children miss set classes only, or 'wag' after being marked present. Others forge sick notes or are covered for by parents who can't get their children to school but don't want them taken to court. Others have an everlasting supply of good reasons for leaving school once they have arrived. Others are kept home by parents and some have simply been away for so long that their names are no longer on the roll.'
>
> (Denne 1981:12)

Hersov and Berg (1980:2) refer to truancy in a narrow sense as 'unjustifiable absence from school without the parents' knowledge or approval'. However, Robins and Ratcliff (1980:68) adopt a less restrictive definition by referring to truancy as 'absence from school without an acceptable reason, whether or not the parents know and approve'. From such definitions it is clear that truancy, at least in the first instance, may be described as non-attendance at school when attendance is expected by law and/or the school.

This description is enticingly simple until terms such as absenteeism, wagging, school refusal, school phobia and school withdrawal are introduced and treated as being diffent from, or interchangeable with, the term truancy. These other terms have connotations about the age of offending students, the frequency of school non-attendance, reasons for non-attendance and the form of response deemed appropriate to address the behaviour. Such facets should not be neglected in working towards an understanding of the phenomenon of truancy; in an important sense they reflect the judgement of authorities about, or theories relating to causes of, particular patterns of student non-attendance at school.

The age of students may influence these judgements. For example, school non-attendance for younger children, especially of early primary school age, is generally regarded as being due to illness or parental instigation (Hersov and Berg, 1980). Wilful truancy, on the other hand, is thought to be a more appropriate explanation for older students (Fogelman *et al.*, 1980). With regard to the frequency of non-attendance, as absence from school becomes more frequent it is more likely to be deliberate (Hersov and Berg, 1980). In Victoria, frequency of school non-attendance has been defined as a key criterion for exercising certain types of intervention for identified truant behaviour.[1]

Some explanations of school non-attendance focus on the psychological maladjustment of students. For example, the terms school phobia or school refusal are often used to identify those students who exhibit symptoms of psychosomatic illnesses and other symptoms such as irrational fear of school. Most commonly, school phobia is attributed to a psychological disorder that arises when the child experiences separation anxiety in relation to the mother (Carroll, 1977; Denne, 1981; Farrington, 1980).

In preference to non-attendance, absenteeism, or wagging, truancy is the principal term used throughout this report to refer to unexcused school non-attendance. Several reasons guided this choice. First, absenteeism usually engenders a sense of occasional rather than frequent or chronic non-attendance, and wagging is the common term used by students perhaps indiscriminately, to refer to non-attendance. The term truancy, as most widely used in education and social welfare circles, encompasses both infrequent and frequent absences. Second, the use of this term contains implicit reference to unacceptable absences, whether considered unacceptable by schools and other social institutions (e.g. welfare agencies, police) or by students who believe that their reasons for absence are based on insufficient grounds to be normally acceptable to the school administration. Third, while some truant behaviour may be attributed to psychological maladjustment, it is unlikely that

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1. See Report of Working Party on School Attendance to the Interdepartmental Committee (Education Department and Department of Community Welfare Services), Melbourne, 1983.

explanations such as school phobia account for the vast majority of these acts (cf. Petrie, 1983; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). Truancy is more typically taken to indicate conduct disorders than psychological disorders (Polk and Schafer, 1972). Furthermore, it is intended that the term truancy convey a notion of school non-attendance set in a context of social and school conditions (assumed to be linked to the behaviour) and accordingly discourage responses which directly focus on psychological disorders.

Another issue relating to a definition of truancy is the distinction between the compulsory and post-compulsory years of secondary school. School attendance in the compulsory years is legislated and, consequently, truancy may be regarded as a law violation. On the other hand, school non-attendance for young people over the age of 15 years is not a violation of law but may be regarded as a contravention of official school policies. The term truancy as used in this study, therefore, refers to school non-attendance, without acceptable excuse, across both the compulsory and post-compulsory years.

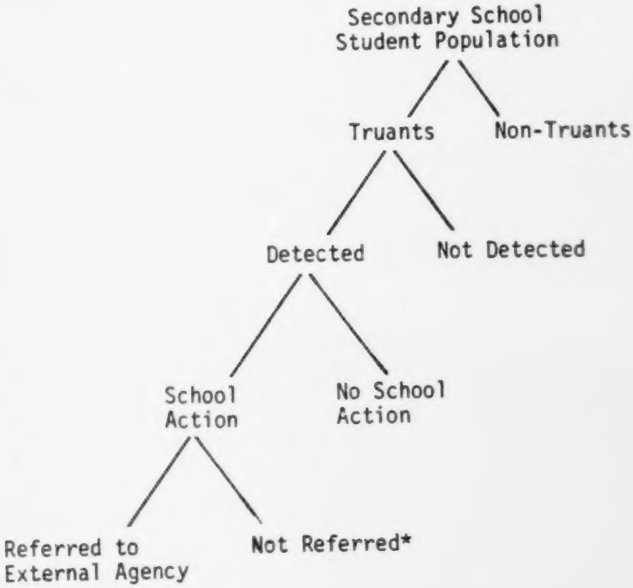
1.2 Identifying Truants

Comprehensive, accurate information concerning the extent of truancy is difficult to obtain. Problems of conceptualisation, definition and measurement confound the state of knowledge about the prevalence of and predisposing factors in truant behaviour. In addition, the intensity of truant behaviour varies from irregular to extended occurrence for different individuals in different schools (Denne, 1981). For such reasons, much of the available evidence about the causes and consequences of truancy has been based on investigations of 'chronic' truants who have come to the attention of school counsellors or welfare (and court) authorities. These young people, however, are not representative of all those students who engage in truant behaviour; many go undetected or are not subjected to the formal procedures used by social institutions to deal with truancy (i.e. they are not 'processed').

Figure 1.1 represents a schematic view of truancy in secondary schools.

FIGURE 1.1

Truancy in Secondary Schools



* It is recognised that some truanting students may come to the attention of school and non-school authorities in ways other than through school attendance procedures.

The literature suggests that the majority of secondary school students conform to school attendance regulations. A significant number, however, are involved in truant behaviour at some point during their years of secondary schooling. Not all of those who engage in acts of truancy are detected by schools - this may be referred to as 'hidden' truancy, a notion similar to that used in the literature concerned with delinquency. Some truants who come to the attention of school authorities are formally dealt with under the school's attendance regulations while others are not. Further, a smaller group of these truants who are subject to action by schools may be referred to other agencies, including social welfare bodies, special purpose schools and the justice system. These students by their patterns of non-attendance and other factors governing institutional responses to their behaviour, are most likely to be those labelled as chronic truants. Distinctions between the various subpopulations of truants (indicated in Figure 1.1) should not be ignored in understanding and responding to truancy in secondary schools. The group of truants from whom evidence about truancy is gathered will have important implications and limitations for policies intended to apply to other groups of young people who engage in similar behaviour.

In this study, truancy has been measured by official school attendance records and student self-report data so that a more representative picture of school non-attendance can be drawn and a broader examination of the phenomenon of truancy can be undertaken. The use of these two measures of unexplained school non-attendance provides some coverage of both 'detected' and 'not detected' truanting students.

1.3 Society, Youth and Truancy

Available Australian and overseas literature explicitly concerned with truancy is conflicting. Neither clear cut nor consistent answers have been given to questions about the extent, distribution, causes and consequences of truancy. Furthermore, little is known about the processes by which some truants come to the attention of school and welfare authorities, while others do not.

Although truancy has long been regarded as a problem, no comprehensive description of its extent is available in Victoria, Australia or overseas. However, Denney (1974), in reviewing a collection of British research studies, estimated that truancy is engaged in by 2-5 percent of all school children. In Victoria and New South Wales estimates of 'illegal absences' for secondary school students ranged from 2 to 20 percent of the population (Hounslow, 1979). While reliable official data are scarce, some Victorian teachers have conducted small-scale research studies restricted to individual schools. For example, Leighfield (1981) in a weekly records check in a Melbourne suburban secondary school found that 'illegitimate absences' increased from Year 7 to Years 10 and 11 and that in this school, 23 percent of males and 22 percent of females from Years 7 to 11 had had one or more illegitimate absence during a school week.

Care must be taken when using such figures as a basis for estimating the extent of truancy. Studies vary in terms of defining what constitutes truancy, the time of data collection and the age of the student population examined.

Like other social problems it is clear that no consensus about a neat definition is available from the literature. Indeed, given the complex nature of the phenomenon, it is hard to imagine any explanation being acceptable to all who come into contact with truanting students. Stereotypes of the 'typical' truant differ, depending on who one talks to; students, parents, teachers, school attendance officers and police hold different views because of differing perceptions regarding the frequency and/or severity of the behaviour.

Explanations of truancy which have tended to focus on the chronic truant have predominantly been framed in terms of two psychological frameworks. The common feature of these is that truancy is attributed to individual deficit and is seen as amenable to treatment at an individual level (Carroll, 1977; Kahn, 1974; Reid and Kendall, 1982). The psychodynamic approach, for example, views truancy as a problem derived from inadequate childhood socialisation. Behaviourists, on the other hand, argue that the causes are more related to the child's immediate environment (Birman and Natriello, 1978). In such explanations, it is commonly assumed that there is some linkage between school satisfaction and truant behaviour, although these explanations remain focussed on individual students.

More recently, alternative explanations have been developed which have shifted from the individual to school or societal level perspectives about truancy. School characteristics such as forms of governance and types of curriculum have been linked to rates of absenteeism, thereby emphasising the importance of the school in any causal analysis of truancy (Birman and Natriello, 1978; Scherer and Bidmeade, 1982; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). By implication, such explanations tend to regard groups of truants, rather than individual truants, as the focus of study.

Other works have focussed on the role of institutional processes, although many researchers continue to argue that school processes should be understood in relation to the low status, deprivation and 'unfortunate' home backgrounds of many truanting students (May, 1975; Reid, 1981, 1982, 1983; Tyerman, 1968). In other words, at least some structural perspectives on truancy have maintained an individual deficit, albeit caring, view of such young people. It appears that, while there has been an increasing emphasis placed on the school, the predominant view has remained one of individual maladjustment.

Not all school and societal level explanations, however, reinforce deficit notions about individual students (Hawkins, 1982; Hersov and Berg, 1980; Reynolds and Murgatroyd, 1977; Rutter _et al_., 1979; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). Truancy has been regarded as a form of school resistance which provides a conceptual link to broader issues in Australian society including the structure of youth unemployment, the perceived relevance or irrelevance of schooling and the low articulation betwen schools and other aspects of present and future needs of young people (Birman and Natriello, 1978; Hawkins, 1982; Knight, 1981; Willis, 1977).

A common thread throughout these views is that truancy, as a socially-defined behaviour, requires explanatory frameworks that incorporate the structures and functions of our social institutions, as well as the role and status of youth in contemporary society. Australia, like many other countries, has entered an era in which the problems of young people, especially those of post-compulsory school age, have become exacerbated. Youth as an age group and as part of the whole of society, may be characterised as one of economic and political marginality (Pearl _et al_., 1978). As youth become of an age when they are no longer able to command the security, support and tolerance that surrounds childhood they are, at the same time, denied full access to the world of work, the political process, legal rights and other crucial elements of adult status (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1976).

The effect of a lack of meaningful employment opportunities for many youth (e.g. Ginzberg, 1977; Stricker and Sheehan, 1981), coupled with an educational process (e.g. grading and streaming) which sifts and sorts young people into 'successes' and 'failures', may lead them to a sense of powerlessness, feelings that school is irrelevant, and pessimism about their futures (Coleman, 1973; Knight, 1981; OECD, 1983; Pearl, 1972;

Polk and Kobrin, 1972). Truancy, in this regard, has been viewed as one response to institutional arrangements of schools which have led to the structural and psychological alienation of young people (Birman and Natriello, 1978; Pearl, 1972; Pink, 1982; Polk and Schafer, 1972; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). More specifically, Tinto (1978) has contended that a great deal of truant behaviour is structurally induced due to the incompatability between commonly held goals of educational success and the legitimate means of goal attainment. While official withdrawal from school may be a response available to older students, those of compulsory school age may regard truancy (or unofficial school withdrawal) as a rational option. For many students, therefore, an appropriate explanation of truancy may lie in an understanding of the inadequacies of our social institutions rather than the maladjustment of individuals.

The nature of institutional responses will largely be conditioned or structured by the way truant behaviour is viewed. However, more comprehensive information about the patterns, antecedents and consequences of truancy is required in order to judge whether institutional responses (both educational and welfare) are of an appropriate and useful kind. On balance, it would appear that such responses need to be informed by the present social conditions that influence the lives of youth.

1.4 Aims of the Study

The major purpose of this research is to provide data and discussion concerning the nature, extent, causes and consequences of truancy. Further, this research is intended to facilitate analysis and understanding of truant behaviour, including its relationship to juvenile delinquency, within a framework that encompasses the educational experiences of young people in contemporary society.

This study attempts to measure official truancy using school attendance records, although problems of identifying genuine absences (e.g. illness) from school records, as noted by Wilson and Braithwaite (1977), arose during data collection. Further, self-report measures which capture hidden or undetected truancy are used. Both measures are used to describe patterns of the incidence of truancy in the compulsory and post-compulsory years of secondary school and relationships between truancy and measures of family background, school characteristics, attitudes to school, peer group attachments and educational/employment activities (in the post-compulsory years of education). Truant behaviour is also examined in terms of whether it is related to juvenile delinquency and whether truancy is part of a pattern of behaviour including more serious law violations.

Major research objectives, of both a descriptive and theoretical nature, which guided the investigation were:

1. To provide a description of the incidence, distribution and pattern of truant behaviour across the secondary school years;
2. To indentify school and student variables which account for observed patterns of involvement in truant behaviour;
3. To examine the relationship between characteristics of truants and offical school responses to truancy;
4. To examine the relationship between truant behaviour and juvenile delinquency;
5. To examine the relationship between truant behaviour and post-compulsory schooling experiences.

In order to gather data for analyses of these questions the central component in the design of the research project (see Chapter 2) combined an existing data set, drawn from two waves of a longitudinal panel study (N=2378), with collection of a new third wave of data for the same group. The resultant data base for the panel, a representative sample of Victorian Year 9 secondary school students in 1980, was augmented by their official secondary school attendance and criminal justice system records. Detailed agreements with the Victoria Police guaranteed strict confidentiality of juvenile delinquency records. In addition, the research design included a cross-sectional component, whereby a smaller number of younger students were interviewed and surveyed by a team of 40 students who conducted eight case studies of truancy in schools.[2] These case studies, as well as interviews and surveys conducted by Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (VISE) research staff, provided in-depth information about the problem of truancy from the perspectives of students, secondary school staff, community welfare authorities and members of the police force.

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[2] See Coventry, Cornish and Cramer (1984), Student Perspectives on Truancy, for a detailed report of these findings.

Two key variables investigated in this study, truancy and juvenile delinquency, are regarded as forms of troublesome behaviour engaged in by some youth. Both are examined by use of a theoretical model drawn from truancy, juvenile delinquency and youth development literature. This model, developed from an analysis of competing theories concerned with social deviance is described in Chapter 3. Briefly, the model is based on the interrelationships of family background (i.e. socioeconomic status, parental expectations for their children's educational attainment), structural characteristics of schools (i.e. size, socioeconomic level, school climate, school attendance regulations and monitoring procedures), student commitment to school (i.e. self-perception of achievement, occupational aspirations, attitiudes about the importance of school and schooling) and attachment to peer groups (i.e. 'trouble'-oriented and 'success'-oriented friends) with young people's engagement in truancy and juvenile delinquency.

1.5 Structure of the Report

Analysis of the diverse and comprehensive data sets available for this study is no easy task. In the chapters which follow, the main thread of analysis draws upon the VISE longitudinal study.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology of the truancy study including the sources of data, measures used and a description of the variables under study. Chapter 3 reviews the relevant literature concerning truancy, and juvenile delinquency, in order to establish the basis for a theoretical model which is subsequently tested. The extent of truancy and the characteristics of truants in Victorian schools are explored in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 the consequences of truant behaviour are addressed in terms of involvement in juvenile delinquency and education/employment activities of young people in the post-compulsory years of schooling. Chapter 6 contains the results of the empirical testing of the theoretical model described in Chapter 3. The final chapter summarises information about typical responses of Victorian secondary schools to truant behaviour and attempts to provide some new directions for responding to the truancy phenomenon.

CHAPTER 2

THE TRUANCY STUDY: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This chapter describes the research design and the methodological procedures which were implemented to examine the research questions listed in Chapter One. Given that truancy is understood in a variety of ways, it seemed appropriate to employ a multi-faceted design which examined the behaviour from several different perspectives.

2.1 Sources of Data

This research investigation blended both qualitative and quantitative research techniques . For example, quantitative data were appropriate to establish estimates of the incidence, distribution and pattern of truant behaviour across the secondary school years. Qualitative data were gathered to provide material which illuminated and elaborated the quantitative analysis.

The following data collection procedures constituted the major blocks of the research design:

Document and literature search

Longitudinal panel study

Case studies

Survey of school principals/senior staff

Discussions with school, community welfare and police personnel.

Document and Literature Search

Beginning in mid-1982 and continuing throughout the conduct of this study, research staff collected a large volume of literature related to truancy. This literature, including government research reports, journal articles and books, was drawn from Australia and overseas (particularly the United States and Britain). Relevant literature is listed in the bibliography and its substance is addressed throughout the report.

Longitudinal Panel Study

The central quantitative data base for this study has been a longitudinal panel study conducted by the VISE since 1980. Prior to commencement of the truancy study, two waves of survey data had been collected from an original panel of 2378 male and female students who in 1980 attended Year 9 in a representative sample of Victorian schools. During the conduct of this research an additional wave of survey data was collected and official school attendance and police records for the group were obtained.

This longitudinal panel study was originally designed in 1978 as a means of obtaining information about the determinants of students' vocational/educational plans and aspirations, and the relationship between plans and actual outcomes. A longitudinal framework was chosen to allow for the identification of long-term relationships among variables and the measurement of changes in the variables over time.

In May 1980, the first questionnaire (i.e. wave 1 data collection) was administered to a sample of Year 9 students (N = 2378), mostly aged about 14 years, enrolled in Victorian government, non-government non-catholic (independent) and catholic secondary schools. Estimates of the number of secondary school students in Victoria were based on 1978 enrolment data for government and independent schools and 1979 enrolment data for catholic schools. The use of the sampling method known as stratified proportionate sampling (see Kish, 1965) provided some assurance that the sample selected would be representative of the Victorian Year 9 secondary school population. Schools were stratified according to three characteristics:

1. Geographical region (Melbourne metropolitan, country-urban and country);
2. School system (government high,government technical, independent and catholic);
3. Single-sex, coeducational.

In addition, the size of schools' student populations was taken into account by rank ordering schools according to size within each stratum.

Twenty-six Victorian secondary schools were selected for sampling.[1] From these schools, 2378 students were identified to be surveyed in wave one. The number and percentages of students within each stratification category are presented in Table 2.1.[2]

TABLE 2.1

School Characteristics of Wave 1 (1980) Sample

	N Males	N Females	N Persons	Percent of Characteristic
Characteristic:				
Geographic Region				
Melbourne metropolitan	812	769	1,581	66
country auburn	237	217	454	19
country	161	182	343	14
School System				
government high	419	606	1,025	43
government technical	495	79	574	24
catholic	153	386	539	23
independent	143	97	240	10
Single-Sex/Coeducational				
single-sex	583	482	1,065	45
coeducational	627	686	1,313	55

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1. See Appendix 1 for sampling methodology.
2. Categories in all tables in this report do not always add up to 100% because of rounding.

In order to ensure that the proportion of students within the strata reflected the actual proportion of Year 9 students in the Victorian secondary school population, stratum weights were applied (see Appendix 1 for details of the weighting procedure). The weighted sample consisted of 1210 males and 1168 females.

The 1980 wave 1 survey questionnaire consisted of general social background questions (including socioeconomic class and ethnicity), vocational and educational plans, attitudes toward school and success at school items and school subjects inventories.

In July 1981, wave 2 data were obtained from two groups of young people in the panel; those who were attending school in Year 10 and those who had left school. For the in-school group, follow-up data were collected including vocational aspirations and intentions, educational aspirations and intentions, attitudes toward school, friends' plans, and perceptions of parents' and teachers' opinions about educational intentions. School leavers were asked about their reasons for leaving school, the influence of others on their decision to leave, characteristics about their job status (including unemployment) and their future education and employment intentions.

A substantial concern for wave 3 data collection was differential loss from the panel because of attrition. Given that the respondent loss rate of the original panel at wave 2 amounted to 13 percent and that serious problems for data analysis and interpretation would be introduced if attrition from the panel continued at this high rate, efforts to maximise the response rate were of utmost concern. An alteration in the data collection procedures, which to that point had been conducted through the schools, was necessary given that many panel members had left the school they attended in 1980 and had enrolled at other schools or had taken employment.[3]

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3. Appendix 1 provides data concerning respondent loss from waves 1 to 3 and estimates of bias in univariate and bivariate analyses.

With the cooperation of each school, extensive tracking procedures were initiated.[4] In November 1982, each school was requested to provide the last known home (or contact) address for those panel students who had attended the school in 1980. In addition, research staff contacted other schools, referred to state telephone directories and contacted peers in an effort to gain updated address information. As a result of these tracking procedures, addresses for all but 62 members of the original panel were obtained, although it is not possible to determine the accuracy of all addresses because of non-response and return of unclaimed mail.[5]

In March 1983, the third wave of data collection commenced. At that stage, many of those panel members still at school were undertaking a Year 12 course. By the time coding was completed in July 1983, 83 percent of the 2316 panel members who were mailed a survey had responded. Issues regarding truancy, employment (both full-time and part-time), Year 12 education activities, school leavers, attitudes to school, and peer groups structured the majority of items contained in the survey of relevance to the present study. As indicated above, there was approximately a 19 percent attrition rate from wave 1 to wave 3, although 8 percent appears due to unavailability of address information for original panel members.

As part of the third wave, two official sources of data were collected. In April 1983, the sample schools were forwarded a request to provide daily school attendance records and any files containing explanations of school absences from 1978 to 1982 in order that attendance patterns of panel members could be coded. During the period April to June 1983, research staff visited 25 schools to code available data. In addition, birth dates of the group were requested; a necessary piece of information for subsequent searching of police records. As birthdates became available, these were provided (along with names) to police staff who searched police records to identify which panel members had been processsed by the criminal justice system. Photocopied records were coded by VISE research staff in the offices of the Police Department. For those for whom no birthdate could be found, crosschecking of address information and 'known accomplices' enabled research staff to establish whether these persons who had acquired a police record were panel members. During all phases of this data gathering exercise all parties formally agreed that information pertaining to individuals would be treated confidentially and would not be used for any purpose other than this research.

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[4] The number of schools was reduced from 26 to 25 because one school from which the original panel was sampled had closed by 1982.

[5] Together with post office returned mail, a minimum estimate of 8 percent of the original panel could not be located.

Case Studies

In order to elaborate and extend the data provided through the longitudinal study base and to investigate, in particular, the problem of truancy across various year levels within schools eight case studies were conducted. The methodological approach adopted is significant because the case studies of truancy (including organisational responses to truancy) were conducted by student research teams, many of whom had been labelled as truants.

Planning for the student research component of the truancy study commenced in the 1983 school year. Negotiation with a contact teacher from each school (5 government, 2 independent and 1 catholic school) which participated in this component of the study took place during the first term of the 1983 school year and resulted in the contact teachers recruiting students for the research teams. Each teacher was asked to recruit a team of four to six Year 10 and/or Year 11 students. VISE research staff requested that each team include students who had a history of truancy and that the teams reflected mixed 'academic' abilities.

Originally, 40 students from the eight schools (6 in the Melbourne metropolitan area, 1 in a Victorian provincial city and 1 in a Victorian rural town) were recruited to work on the project. During the course of term two 1983, when this component of the study was implemented, 10 students opted to withdraw from the project. Five of the student researchers were replaced. The size and composition of the resulting research teams ranged from 2 to 7 members, drawn from three year levels

(Years 9 to 11 were represented, but most students were Year 10), with the balance leaning toward what the teachers considered the less 'academic' students. Each research team included students who were regarded by the school as having a history of truancy.

Research training and assistance for the student research teams was carried out through seminars and field visits. Throughout the early seminars, the students generated the research questions which they believed were important to address in a study of truancy. These provided the starting point for the development of research plans in each school and were concerned with several aspects of truant behaviour including reasons for truancy, family factors, punishment and peer involvement. The research questions added several new dimensions to the research problem which are not apparent from available research literature, e.g. does truancy cost money? Are students aware of compulsory school attendance laws? Why don't truants opt to leave school officially?

Training (which included issues of confidentiality and informed consent) assisted the teams to develop research plans, which differed from school to school. Field visits by VISE research staff built on the foundation established at the seminars. Communication took place on a weekly basis with arrangements being made through elected team leaders. Also, there were several mailings of resource materials to support the teams' progress through each stage of research. The materials provided background reading prior to field visits and facilitated the conduct of the research activities.

Reports prepared by the student research teams were based upon a variety of research methods (e.g. questionnaires, interviews, observations, literature) and reporting styles (including a video). Student Perspectives on Truancy (Coventry, Cornish and Cramer, 1984), a compilation of these reports, has been published as a separate report of this study. The present report refers to findings of the case study data as appropriate.

Survey of School Principals/Senior Staff

In November 1983, a pretested survey questionnaire was mailed to the principals of 667 Victorian secondary schools. The 46-item questionnaire gathered information about school characteristics (e.g. number of teaching staff, location, type of school, size of student population), school attendance policies, methods of recording school attendance, procedures implemented for non-attendance, specific programs for non-attendance, linkages with external agencies, resources needed to deal with persistent non-attenders and perceptions about the causes of truancy. When survey coding was completed, 75 percent of the schools had returned a survey, although 26 percent of these could not be identified.[6] Identifiable surveys were obtained for all 25 schools originally sampled in the longitudinal study.

Discussions with School, Community Welfare and Police Personnel

During the course of this study, research staff contacted educational, community welfare and police staff. As part of the procedures implemented to conduct the student case studies, contact teachers at each of the 8 schools participated in two seminars (held in May and September 1983) to discuss issues relevant to the major research objectives of the study. Other educationists, including a Melbourne metropolitan regional curriculum consultant and staff of three metropolitan special purpose schools (established cooperatively by the Victorian Departments of Education and Community Welfare Services) which have a large proportion of students with histories of school-related problems (particularly truancy in traditional schools), were interviewed. To gather information from the local welfare perspective, officers of the School Attendance Program, a Counselling Guidance and Clinical Services unit of the Education Department, Children's Protection Society and the Child Welfare Practice and Legislation Review Committee were contacted. Finally, four police officers attached to Community Policing Squads (3 metropolitan regions and one country region) and two Cautioning Officers were interviewed to gain a police perspective about truancy. Aggregate data concerning youth offenders in 1983 were also made available by the Community Policing Squads.

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[6] 130 schools returned surveys with the identification numbers erased.

These discussions have provided relevant contemporary information and access to official departmental/agency documents concerning truancy necessary for the preparation of this report.

2.2 Measuring the Dimensions of Trouble

The term truancy means many things. A necessary, but not sufficient condition for its definition is that a student is absent from school during regular school hours. Similarly, a second condition is that such absenteeism warrants a school label of being unexplained and/or unacceptable to the school's standards of student conduct. This condition requires elaboration of what is considered acceptable or unacceptable by both schools and students.

What longitudinal study data are available to address these conditions? In April-June 1983, research staff visited each of the 25 schools from which the original longitudinal panel was drawn to gain access to official school attendance records. The plan was to gather attendance rolls from 1978 to 1982 corresponding to each successive year level (i.e. Years 7 to 11) in which panel members were enrolled. Further, rolls were to be searched in order to draw distinctions between explained (e.g. sickness) and unexplained (i.e. truancy) absences. From these data it was intended to measure the extent of acceptable absenteeism and truant behaviour for each member of the panel for each year (and term) she/he attended the school in which she/he was enrolled as a Year 9 student in 1980.

However, this data gathering exercise provided only a partial picture of truant behaviour. School records were found to vary greatly. Few schools were able to produce 5 complete years of attendance data and panel members did not attend the same school for each of the 5 years; many students transferred to other schools or were early school leavers (i.e. pre-Year 12 commencement). Consequently, the information obtained for panel members over the 15 data points (i.e. attendance data for each school term from 1978 to 1982) ranges from one term to 15 terms.

For this study, the unexplained absences taken from school attendance rolls provided the measure of officially defined truant behaviour. However, there were gaps in the data because of unavailability of attendance records and the lack of distinction between explained and unexplained absences presented some problems for analysis.[7]

The works of May (1975), Reynolds *et al*. (1980) and Reid and Kendall (1982), among others, raise considerable doubt concerning the validity and reliability of official school registers (rolls) as accurate measures of school attendance. As Reid and Kendall (1982) noted:

> 'Most researchers now agree that valid and reliable measures of attendance are very difficult to obtain and interpret. In particular, absence figures which are based on school registers are notoriously unreliable...'
>
> (Reid and Kendall, 1982:296)

These research studies have suggested that it is not unusual for students to be marked as present when they are actually absent or to leave the school immediately following the marking of attendance rolls. In other words, official records may provide biased estimates of relevant truancy parameters. While they may provide schools with misconduct information and may be considered as a measure of school detection of non-attendance behaviours of students (and, therefore, enable a research link to be made to labelling concerns), there is widespread agreement that they do not tap the extent of truancy actually occurring in any given school.

In an attempt to ensure that undetected (i.e. hidden) truant behaviours were also given attention, the wave 3 longitudinal survey included self-report items. The first of these asked respondents to indicate the extent of their involvement in 'truancy' in Years 9-11, or in those years they had attended secondary school.[8] In addition, the wave 3 instrument was designed to gather information about the activities students usually engaged in when truant from school, as well as whether truancy was an individual or peer group behaviour. These data are discussed in Chapter 4.

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[7] See Appendix 3 for further details.

[8] Due to the problems of retrospective data collection methods, self report items were not included for Years 7 and 8 and only required yearly estimates to minimise problems with respondent recall.

For this study, therefore, two key measures of truancy were available. The low correlation between these two measures ($r = 0.25$) is of the same order as that usually found between official and self-report measures of minor delinquent behaviours (e.g. see Burcart, 1977). While the truancy measures cover the compulsory and post-compulsory years of schooling, for the most part the official data refer to the compulsory years of secondary school and the self-report data refer to Years 9-11.

Both official and self-report data provide frequency estimates of truancy. The self-report items contained 5 response categories: never, very little, once/twice per month, once per week, more than once per week. In order to provide some similarity between the frequency measures obtained from self-report and official data, the raw data obtained from school attendance records were collapsed into 5 categories: never, very little (1-2 days per term), little (3-8 days per term), frequent (9-12 days per term), very frequent (13 or more days per term). It should be noted that the self-report data refer to yearly estimates of truancy, whereas the official data refer to term estimates within school years.

A subsequent problem associated with adequately representing data from these measures arises from the episodic nature of truancy (see Chapter 4). One possibility would be to average student involvement in truancy across the secondary school years. This technique, however, would not have provided data important for this study, namely the proportion of students who at sometime during secondary school engage in some amount of truancy. In this study, therefore, the central measures of the frequency of truant behaviour are the maximum of levels of involvement in truancy, irrespective of year level, obtained from both self-report data and school attendance records.

The definition of juvenile delinquency, the second category of trouble examined, holds more common agreement, although not all delinquency is detected by authorities (e.g. see Gibbons, 1982). Because a major aim of this research was to examine the relationship between truancy and official juvenile delinquency, police records were accessed to provide an official measure of delinquency.[9] It was not considered feasible to request panel members to report delinquent behaviour although further research using self-report measures may well be appropriate.

Using Victorian police records, panel members were coded according to whether they had been in contact with the police for law violations, the number of police contacts that had occurred by August 1983, the number and types of offences charged, the dates of police contacts and court proceedings and the type of dispositions (i.e. caution, fine, probation, institutionalisation) received for each charged offence. Of the original panel, 190 young people (8 percent) were identified as being official juvenile delinquents. Given the size of this group and resulting problems for analysis which would be introduced with further subdivision, this report uses only a dichotomous measure of juvenile delinquency (i.e. delinquent/non-delinquent) for the analysis of the relationship between truancy and juvenile delinquency.

2.3 Measurement of Longitudinal Variables

For the truancy model developed in Chapter 3 and the data analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6, relevant clusters of variables were selected from the longitudinal study instruments. Four clusters of variables - individual characteristics, family background characteristics, school characteristics and social psychological characteristics - were selected from the wave 1 questionnaire. In addition, a fifth cluster - peer group characteristics - was available from the wave 3 questionnaire. In addition to these five clusters of variables which constitute the background variables, along with the juvenile delinquency and truancy measures, the longitudinal data base provides a measure of the educational and employment activities of the panel at wave 3 (i.e. in the equivalent of the post-compulsory years). A brief description of these variables follows.

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[9] Given that official juvenile delinquency normally peaks after age 15, measures of truant behaviour which included the post-compulsory years of schooling were required to investigate the relationship between truancy and juvenile delinquency.

Individual Characteristics

Gender: a dichotomous variable indicating sex of respondents.

Ethnicity: a variable classifying respondents according to country of birth as follows -

Australian-born (both respondent and parents born in Australia)

Born in English-speaking country (either respondent or parent born in English-speaking country outside Australia)

Born in Non-English-speaking country (either respondent or parent born in non-English-speaking country).

Family Background Characteristics

Three variables were regarded as specific indicators of social class position and were combined to create an index of socioeconomic status measured on a continuous scale (alpha = 0.71).[10]

Socioeconomic status: the three variables were -

Father's occupation (a 6-point scale of occupational prestige classified according to Broom _et al_., 1965); possible scores ranged from 1, representing low status (i.e. unskilled labour) to 6, representing high status (i.e. professional employment)

Father's educational attainment (a 9-point scale where 1 represented no schooling and 9 represented completion of a university degree)

Mother's educational attainment (as for father's educational attainment).

Another family background variable selected for analysis was parents' educational expectations for their children as perceived by panel members.

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[10] See Appendix 4 for intercorrelation matrices for all indices.

Parental Educational Expectations: a variable measuring respondents' perceptions of the educational expectations held for them by their parents. Measurement was on a scale of 1-5, where 1 represented leaving secondary school before the end of Year 9 and 5 represented leaving at the end of Year 12. In addition, a category of 'not known' was included.

School Characteristics

Five characteristics of the school attended by the panel as Year 9 students were drawn from wave 1 data.

School System: a variable providing 4 categories of Victorian secondary schools -
Government high
Government technical
Catholic
Independent.

School Location: a variable providing 3 categories -
Melbourne metropolitan
Country-urban
Country.

Sex of Student Population: a variable providing 3 categories -
All Male
All Female
Coeducational.

School Socioeconomic Level: a composite variable obtained by averaging the socioeconomic status background of the respondents for each school.

School Climate: a composite variable obtained by averaging respondents' scores, for each school, for attitudes to school, attitudes to teachers and occupational aspirations (see below).

Two additional measures of the structural characteristics of the 25 schools in the longitudinal study were obtained from the 1984 survey of school principals.

School Size: a variable measured on a scale from 1-7, representing the number of students at each school in categories from less than 200 to greater than 1200.

School Action: a 5-item index (alpha = 0.72) of the extent to which schools implement practices to monitor and respond to truant behaviour.

Social Psychological Characteristics

Items concerning attitudes about the importance of school and schooling, perception of educational success compared with other students, and occupational aspirations were included in the wave 1 longitudinal survey. The two variables, school success and occupational aspirations, provide two measures of students' placement within school success flows (see Chapter 3 for discussion of success flow).

School Success: a variable measuring students' opinions of their own educational success compared with that of other students. Response categories ranged from 1 ('below average') to 3 - 'better than most'.

Occupational Aspirations: a variable measuring students' future job aspirations. Responses were coded on the same scale as that used to measure father's occupation.

School Importance: a 23-item scale (alpha = 0.93) used to measure students' opinions of the importance and value of schooling. These items were Likert-type with categories ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. This scale was used for the path analysis reported in Chapter 6. Two subscales, Attitudes to School (alpha = 0.84) and Attitudes to Teachers (alpha = 0.81), composed of 6 items and 7 items respectively, were used for the descriptive analyses reported in Chapter 4.

Peer Group Characteristics

Four Likert-type items from the wave 3 questionnaire were combined to form an index of peer group attachment (alpha = 0.56). Scores on this index were dichotomised to identify respondents as having 'trouble' oriented friends or 'success' oriented friends in 1983.

Peer group attachment: the items were -

My friends get good marks at school
My friends always seem to be in trouble
My friends have left school
My friends in Year 9 and 10 used to wag school.

Educational/Employment Characteristics

A major dependent variable of this study, relating to the effects of truancy, concerns the educational and employment activities of the panel at wave 3.

Profile at Wave 3: a combined variable (reported in Chapter 5) which classifies panel members according to their involvement in education (in secondary school or other forms of education) and/or employment (both on a full-time and part-time basis) in 1983.

2.4 Summary of Analytical Procedures

Analysis of the quantitative data presented in this report ranges from simple frequency distributions, through cross-tabular analysis to a general path analysis framework. Frequency analysis provides data about the extent and incidence of truancy, while cross-tabular analysis indicates the association between these frequencies and independent variables. The use of path analysis permits examination of the relative contributions of endogenous variables (at given points in the analysis) to truancy and juvenile delinquency and the linkages between these variables. This multivariate method is appropriate for analyses which are structured according to the suggested theoretical and temporal orderings discussed in Chapter 3.

The self-report measure of truancy, obtained for 76 percent of the panel (original panel N = 2378), is based on data collected retrospectively during the wave 3 (1983) administration of the survey questionnaire and covers Years 9 to 11 of secondary school for the panel. The official school attendance records cover each school term for Years 7 to 11. While the school attendance records were not complete for all members of the panel, attendance data were obtained from all but two of the schools sampled and these distinguished between explained and unexplained absences for 90 percent of the panel. Complete official records for the 5 years of secondary school were obtained for only 22 percent of the panel. On the other hand, complete self-report data for Years 9 to 11 were obtained for 63 percent of the panel. (Hence it was necessary to weight the data. The weighting procedure is discussed in Appendix 1.)

In line with the definition of truancy used in this report, the official school attendance data refer only to absences from school which were recorded by the school as being unexplained. Although efforts were made to confirm that unexplained absences from official school records were accurate, it is likely that these data are confounded by inaccuracies in school records. Such inaccuracies may be due to absences being recorded as unexplained but subsequently explained by parents or students. The self-report data were obtained by questionnaire items which requested respondents to indicate the extent to which they 'wagged' school. While these data are of a retrospective kind, self-report instruments have been found to provide reliable estimates of the incidence of deviant behaviours (e.g. see Burcart, 1977; Gibbons, 1982). These two measures provide descriptions of the incidence of truancy in secondary schools from two significant perspectives - that of the young people and that of the school administration.

In the analyses in which a single overall estimate of truancy for each student is needed, the notion of 'maximum frequency of truancy' has been used. This refers to the maximum level of truancy engaged in by each panel member during Years 9 to 11 for the self-report measure and Years 7 to 11 for the official school measure; the 'maximum frequency of truancy' for the self-report measure refers to the maximum yearly level of truancy attained for any of Years 9 to 11, whereas the official measure refers to the maximum term level attained in any term in years 7 to 11. These incidence data do not distinguish between young people who were still officially attending school at the time of the wave 3 survey and those who had officially left school during previous years (i.e. early school leavers).

When considering the results of the path analysis reported in Chapter 6, it is important to take note of a number of potential problems. First, it cannot be assumed that the model contains all of the causes of truant behaviour. To specify and measure all of these causes is an unrealistic task. Second, the reliability of measures varied and, consequently, with certain variables where the reliability was relatively low (e.g. school action), measurement error may confound interpretations based on multivariate relationships.

Third, some variables were not 'truly' interval measures and in the case of the school climate and school socioeconomic level variables aggregated student data were used. Fourth, the truancy model was examined by statistical techniques which assume additive effects of the processes connecting the causal factors. Fifth, available data presented some limitations in that measures were not strictly consistent with the temporal order specified by the theoretical framework of the model. Directions of relationships between measures taken at the same point in time (e.g. wave 1, 1980) were assigned by this framework for purposes of analysis. It is possible that some relationships may be reciprocal, but this could only be reliably tested with cross-lagged data.

CHAPTER 3

RELATED LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRUANCY MODEL

As indicated in Chapter 1, there is a variety of explanations and perspectives about truant behaviour. The literature discussed in more detail in this chapter confirms that individual, family, peer group, social psychological and societal factors have been related to the incidence of truancy. In general, it appears that the behaviour may best be described as 'a multifactor causation phenomenon' (Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). Further, it needs to be recognised that school 'absenteeism represents a different set of difficulties for the student, the school, and the society at large' (Birman and Natriello, 1978:31).

Although truancy has wide-ranging ramifications and has become a significant issue, it remains a vastly misunderstood phenomenon. While the literature, both in Australia and overseas, reveals little consensus about the causes and consequences of truancy it, nonetheless, informs the structure of this research study. Collectively, these studies identify a range of theoretical paradigms which are integrated into a model of truancy and juvenile delinquency (see section 3.8).

3.1 Truancy and the Individual

As previously noted, many studies have adopted a psychological approach to the study of truancy and have based investigations and conclusions on so-called 'chronic' truants. In the literature of the 1940s and 1950s, truants were seen as particular 'types' of students who had poor super-ego control and rebellious attitudes to authority figures. The resultant behaviour was attributed to poor socialisation in childhood (Glueck and Glueck, 1950). More specifically, Tyerman (1958:223) claimed that: 'The truant tends to be a lonely, unhappy and insecure child'.

While some research continues to focus on the psychological attributes of truants (e.g. see Reid and Kendall, 1982, for a review of this literature), a subset of this area of research has been restricted to the investigation of school phobia as one cause of truant behaviour (e.g. Waldron et al., 1975). Such labels which identify truant behaviour as a manifestation of individual maladjustment are numerous (e.g. see Hersov and Berg, 1980) and convey an orientation for analysis and treatment which focusses on psychological attributes of truanting students, whether or not such maladjustment has been identified.

More recently, two lines of criticism have emphasised the need for care when attempting to understand the dynamics of truant behaviour from a perspective which focusses on the maladjustment of the individual. First, Brown (1983) warns that the evidence for findings of such studies is questionable:

> 'Even among studies that use a psychological approach to truancy one finds evidence that raises doubts about the maladjustment of the children used in them.'
> (Brown, 1983:227)

Second, psychological research based on particular sub-groups of truants may not yield representative findings applicable to the general student population, truancy and programs for its prevention. Reid and Kendall (1982), in summarising studies concerning personality research of school absentees, conclude:

> 'Though particular characteristics have emerged which seem to be common among truants and persistent absentees, the typical absentee has not yet been identified. Indeed, such an identification is in some ways impossible and probably worthless for prevention or remediation because of the other factors involved.'
> (Reid and Kendall, 1982:299)

3.2 Truancy and the Family

Historically, a predominant theme in the truancy research literature has concerned the role of the family. Family backgrounds of truants have been discussed from two main perspectives - socialisation influences and social class - which, in general, have been an extension of the individual deficit or maladjustment notion.

Following three years of work, a Scottish government committee stated that family factors were important in an understanding of the truancy phenomenon:

> 'Where there is disruption of normal child/parent relationships the child is emotionally at risk. Marital relationships are also an important influence, in that disharmony between parents has a profound effect on the stability of children...
>
> Many stresses can be introduced into family life when there are large numbers of children. The effect is compounded if the family is poorly housed or receiving inadequate income. Poor housing and inadequate income are factors in their own right.'
>
> (Pack Report, 1977:27)

A view of truancy which centres on the dysfunction of family structures has been extended by Robins and Ratcliff (1980) who argued that the socialisation effects persist not only with the individual, but survive in later generations:

> '... men who were truants in elementary school tended to marry women who truanted in elementary school and ... truancy in either parent was associated with an excess rate of truancy in both sons and daughters, although transmission of truancy to the sons was more striking.'
>
> (Robins and Ratcliff, 1980:67)

Deficit theories about the contribution of the family to truant behaviour have led some researchers (including psychologists) to consider social class background and social status phenomena and their relationship to truancy. Various studies have reported a relationship between social class and school non-attendance, with higher rates of non-attendance being found among lower social class groups (Farrington, 1980; Fogelman et al., 1980; Galloway, 1982; May, 1975; Tyerman, 1968), where the father is either in unskilled or semi-skilled work (e.g. Fogelman et al., 1980; May, 1975; Tyerman, 1968) or is unemployed or employed intermittently (e.g. Farrington, 1980; May, 1975).

On the other hand, researchers such as Rutter et al. (1979) and Mitchell and Shepherd (1980), have found little or no direct relationship between social class and rates of truancy. What has been argued to be of importance is not social class per se, but the attitudes, beliefs and life styles contained within social class boundaries. For example, boys from lower social class backgrounds had negative general attitudes towards schooling and were poor attenders (Mitchell, 1972).

In this regard, however, Carroll (1977) reminds us of the dangers of such social class generalisations:

> '... negative attitudes towards school are not the prerogative of the less able or those from the lowest social class.'
>
> (Carroll, 1977:14)

In considering the contribution of social class to socially-defined deviant behaviours such as truancy, it is important to maintain a perspective about the role played by social class within the structural arrangements of contemporary society. The works of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Willis (1977), among others, indicate that the values engendered through the system and practices of schooling are not always consistent with those of particular social class strata (e.g. working class). Such inconsistencies can lead to non-conforming student attitudes and behaviours. From this argument truant behaviour may be one manifestation of the rejection of school and its perceived purposes.

While the role of social class needs to be addressed in truancy research, its contribution, at present, is unclear. One possible reason for the lack of reproducible research data is that the independent contribution of low social class to truancy is difficult to isolate from the reinforcing and general consequences of such a background which render some of these young people more vulnerable to a range of problem behaviours.

Family-based perspectives which centre on dysfunctional or deficit notions about families generating truant behaviour, like individual maladjustment approaches, have been criticised for neglecting the role and significant influence of the school. Birman and Natriello (1978), Mitchell and Shepherd (1980), Jones (1980) and Silberman (1970), for example, provide evidence that parents of truants are interested in the education of their children. However, research in educational sociology has repeatedly demonstrated that lower social class youth are more likely to be psychologically alienated from schooling processes because of the structure of schools rather than because of family background characteristics which these youth bring into classrooms (e.g. Rist, 1977).

3.3 Truancy and Peer Groups

Another area which has been treated in the literature as a contributor to truant behaviour is the influence of significant others, in particular, peers. Wilson and Braithwaite's (1977) research on truancy in Australia identified that truancy was about three times more likely to occur with peers than alone. Bishop (1980) has suggested that, within school, peer group pressures to engage in truancy with peers may be a relevant factor in school non-attendance. It should be recognised, however, that peer group difficulties (e.g. intimidation) may also be incentives for some students to avoid school (Jones, 1974).

Peer group pressures have been found to operate both within the same school and across schools. Friends from the same community who attend different schools may truant at the same time, indicating that peer group attachments for some youth are not restricted to those observed in a particular school or year level (Carroll, 1977; Mitchell, 1977).

As indicated in section 3.8, explanations regarding the connections between school and youthful deviance have increasingly emphasised the role of differential peer group attachments. It is contended that functions, purposes and practices of the school influence the formation of peer groups which are esentially committed (conforming) or uncommitted (non-conforming) to schooling. Truants, in this regard, are presumed to be more likely to associate with student peer groups characterised as uncommitted or relatively alienated. Further discussion of the influence of the school on student commitment to education is provided in the following section.

3.4 Truancy and the School

The research literature has examined the contribution of the school to truancy from various avenues such as student attitudes towards school, school type and organisational structures, school success, the relationship between school and future employment, and the role of schooling in society. Although there is some diversity in approaches, a dominant theme is evident in this literature - a theme which centres on the relationship between truancy and the value of 'success' as perceived by students, schools and the wider community.

The necessity to include the school in explanatory frameworks of troublesome youth behaviours has been suggested by many. For example, Brown (1983) writes:

> 'Recent trends in the sociology of education have indicated that we need to know a lot more about what goes on inside schools and the study of truancy should not be an exception to this.'
>
> (Brown, 1983:233)

School features such as size, organisational structure (including school attendance rules and regulations), teacher-student relations and curricula have been given attention. While all these features seem to be involved in truancy, the key finding is that those schools in which students have higher general levels of academic achievement and in which they exhibit positive school-related behaviour tend to have higher attendance rates (Anderson, 1973; Baker and Rubel, 1980; Belson 1975; Bishop, 1980; Reynolds and Murgatroyd, 1977; Rutter et al., 1979; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977).

Studies of persistent truants have suggested that truancy leads to the failure to acquire educational credentials (e.g. grades, certificates) which are relevant to successful movement into society as adults. School failure, however, is a systematic process beginning in the early years of schooling (e.g. Pearl, 1972; Silberman, 1970). It has been argued by Silberman (1970) that repeated failure leads to various negative student behaviours (i.e. rebellion against the school, truancy) and attitudes (i.e. low self-esteem and alienation from contemporary societal values and norms).

Investigations of relationships between the lack of academic success and youthful deviance have been commonplace in sociological literature. A major conclusion of this work is that educational failure (which often begins early and accumulates during the adolescent years) may lead students to become involved in deviant behaviours. Polk and Schafer (1972) summarize the available evidence about delinquency (including truancy):

> 'The evidence suggests, then, that educational failure is one experience, especially when combined with a desire for success, that contributes to delinquency. While such failure has been shown to relate to delinquency regardless of family status there are at least two reasons why lower income youth are especially susceptible to this influence toward illegitimate behaviour. First, they fail more often...second, students from higher status backgrounds who fail are likely to be 'held into' the legitimate system by greater pressures from parents and achieving peers and by less accessibility to delinquent or criminal subcultures.'
>
> (Polk and Schafer, 1972:172)

Failure is reinforced by schools and, as Pearl (1972) suggests, is considered by many to be a necessary part of schooling practices and processes. Whether or not one views failure as a necessary feature of schooling, academic performance cannot be solely attributed to the abilities of students. The findings of many studies suggest that academically unsuccessful students may continue to fail to learn because of preconceived notions of what constitutes performance and how performance is to be measured, their teachers teach them less compared with other students, teachers and schools fail to motivate them, and teachers are provided with scant resources with which to modify existing school practices (e.g. see Pink, 1982, for a review of some of this research).

On balance, there is a relationship between poor school performance and non-conforming behaviours such as truancy. Especially strong is the link between self-perception of poor school performance, the labelling of the individual by the school and teacher as academically deficient, and truancy (Petrie, 1983; Rowe, 1970; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). Further, truancy may reduce chances for learning, or as a result of negative labelling, reinforce the likelihood of not attaining a sense of educational success. Denne (1981), in describing some Australian students who truanted, highlights these effects:

> 'Academically they were underachievers, though only a few were of low intelligence. Three-quarters had not yet mastered basic arithmetic. Over half were two years or more behind in their reading but most of the other half had reading ages equal to or far higher than their real ages. Very importantly, even those who were intelligent or had achieved quite well at school regarded their own achievement as hopeless.'
> (Denne, 1981:28-29)

While various studies have characterised persistent or chronic truants as having lower academic performance along with poor self-concepts and general levels of self-esteem, such characteristics are not exclusive to truants. Similar characteristics have been ascribed to early school leavers (e.g. Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1980). A clear articulation of why some students (both in the compulsory and post-compulsory years of schooling) adopt truant behaviour and others do not has not been presented in literature.

If schools promote conditions in which young people may feel rejected and inadequate, then we should not be surprised that some youth displace these feelings by truant behaviour. As Cope and Gray (1978) have observed:

> 'We can legitimately infer that for non-certificate pupils, the perceived irrelevance of much of their school work and their sense of being treated as relatively unimportant... must at very least legitimise their truancy in their own eyes, may have indeed triggered it off, and certainly could not have countered other factors to induce them to absent themselves from schools.'
> (Cope and Gray, 1978:25)

The impact on young people of a school career marked by little or low academic success has also been found to persist into their adult lives. The school confers status upon those who attain academic success and similarly, society confers status upon those who exhibit such success.

The failure to acquire adequate educational credentials due, in part, to truant behaviour during secondary school may predispose these youth to employment problems; without educational credentials only low status, unskilled or semi-skilled positions would be available, at least in the short-term (Farrington, 1980; Gray, Smith and Rutter, 1980; Willis

1977). Robins and Ratcliff (1980) suggest that truant behaviour may have longer term consequences for the futures of young people:

> 'Since high school graduation in turn has substantial effects on job opportunities, not only in terms of prestige and salary but also in terms of job security, any effect of truancy on occupational success can be expected to be mediated to some extent through its effect on high school graduation.'
>
> (Robins and Ratcliff, 1980:73)

While school failure and behavioural problems may represent a cyclical pattern of reinforcement, for the vast majority of students failure produces truancy and not the reverse (e.g. Pink, 1982; Silberman, 1970). Concomitant with the linkage between school failure and truancy is a connection between failure and the psychological attributes of young people. Pearl (1972) and Polk et al. (1981), among others, refer to the psychological alienation of young people that arises when they are segregated from the mainstream success flow of the school. This powerful form of alienation produces a 'dislocation' of the extent to which students' aspirations for their futures are achieved:

> 'Overall discrepancies between job aspirations and job expectations are not common, but when they occur they are consistently related to high rates of truancy. Discrepancies between academic aspirations and actual achievement are very common, and when they occur they are consistently associated with truancy. Thus truancy is related to both absolute failure in the school system and failure to achieve relative to aspirations.'
>
> (Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977:87)

Wilson and Braithwaite (1977) concluded their analysis of schools and truancy by emphasising that an understanding of the structure and functions of schools is fundamental to an understanding of the truancy phenomenon in the Australian context:

> 'Truancy is related to a considerable extent to any overtly competitive school system, which manifests itself in an overemphasis on "competition", on streaming classes, and on the lack of relevance of much of what is taught in school to a child's future.'
>
> (Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977:95)

3.5 Truancy and Contemporary Society

As indicated in Chapter 1, the issue of truancy should be viewed through a broad social lens. While the school has been identified as a major contributor to the structural and consequent psychological alienation of young people, it is necessary to address the broader issue concerning the purposes and functions of the school in contemporary society (Knight, 1981). It is in this context that truancy has become a significant cause for concern, bringing the role, nature and practices of the school into sharper focus. As Birman and Natriello (1980) put it:

> '... high-absenteeism rates threaten the school's legitimacy as an insitution which is legally required to educate all young people.'
>
> (Birman and Natriello, 1980:170)

But as Jones (1980) has suggested, schools face a difficult task:

> 'Society is ambivalent about schools, on the one hand querying whether they serve any useful purpose except ineffectual child-minding, on the other hand expecting far too much of them in both teaching and instilling standards of behaviour. Schools are the victims of this ambivalent attitude.'
>
> (Jones, 1980:172)

The education system operates in a society powerfully controlled by political and economic forces. Schooling is connected to the state of the economy and society's need for a specialised labour force. The education system provides formalised credentials and, therefore, it has been argued that schools are effective tools for reproducing social arrangements in a cultural, political and economic sense (e.g. Apple, 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

Today, however, there is a crisis in society which has implications for education and which is relevant to an understanding of truancy (Birman and Natriello, 1980; Knight, 1981). While it is beyond the scope of this study to detail the social forces relevant to this crisis, some reference to major problems that confront students of post-compulsory school age in particular, and permeate schooling in general, is required. The smooth transition from school to work can no longer be assumed (Polk, 1983). Aspirations of the young for a rewarding and gratifying future as adults cannot be guaranteed (see OECD, 1983). Youth unemployment is high and many forecast it will remain high in the future. As a result of these prevailing economic conditions, youth are becoming a more readily identified and distinctive age group in society (Hawkins, 1982) and are devalued, relatively powerless and somewhat confused as to the meaning of education for their futures (Pearl et al., 1978).

Recently, Australian governments have been debating the merits of increasing school retention rates as part of a strategy to alleviate the employment problems for young people. This strategy would require schools to retain youth who in the past would have entered the labour market. Increasing retention rates by legislation or "persuasion" of young people to remain in school would not, in itself, provide a better education (essentially a curriculum question), although it would ensure that more young people were withheld from the labour force for a longer period of time. Such debates raise the need to consider compulsory school attendance legislation as it relates to truancy - should the minimum age of compulsory attendance be raised? If so, should the view of what constitutes truant behaviour be altered? (see Child Welfare Practice and Legislation Review Committee, 1983).

It has been argued by some that the existence and/or enforcement of compulsory school attendance laws reinforces the role of school as an institution which segregates youth and represents a form of social engineering for extrinsic and short-range goals (Braden, 1978; Goodman, 1962). Coercive practices, according to this argument, should be abolished in the interests of an education system that does not reinforce the status quo and present social and economic inequalities (Illich, 1971). Arguments of this kind would require a rethinking of whether school non-attendance should be regarded as truancy.

An education system that minimises inequality and segregation and maximises long-range options for young people is desirable. However, strategies which centre on the schooling experiences of young people as well as regulations of compulsory school attendance are required. The experiences of truants might provide some directions for a rethinking of an education system that provides an incentive for the meaningful participation of all young people.

3.6 School Responses to Truancy

> 'Deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behaviour; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them. The critical variable in the study of deviance, then, is the social audience rather than the individual actor, since it is the audience which eventually determines whether or not any class of episodes is labelled deviant.'
>
> (Erikson, 1964:11)

The school, as one institution that exercises a social control function, is integrally involved in the institutional processes that lead some young people to be defined as deviant (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Petrie, 1983).

Figure 3.1 is a simplified illustration of the referral network for institutional responses to truant behaviour in Victoria. Certified secondary schools may cooperate with a range of institutions/agencies when students are identified as truants and the school decides that external intervention is warranted. Truanting students may be referred to Counselling Guidance and Clinical Services (of the Educational Department), 'special purpose' schools, the School Attendance Program (of the Department of Community Welfare Services) and, in a few cases where welfare or other legal matters are pertinent, to social workers and the Community Policing Squads. In addition, referral between agencies, other than the school, particularly the Court and Children's Protection Society may occur.[1] The responsibilities and responses of these various agencies are described in Appendix 2.

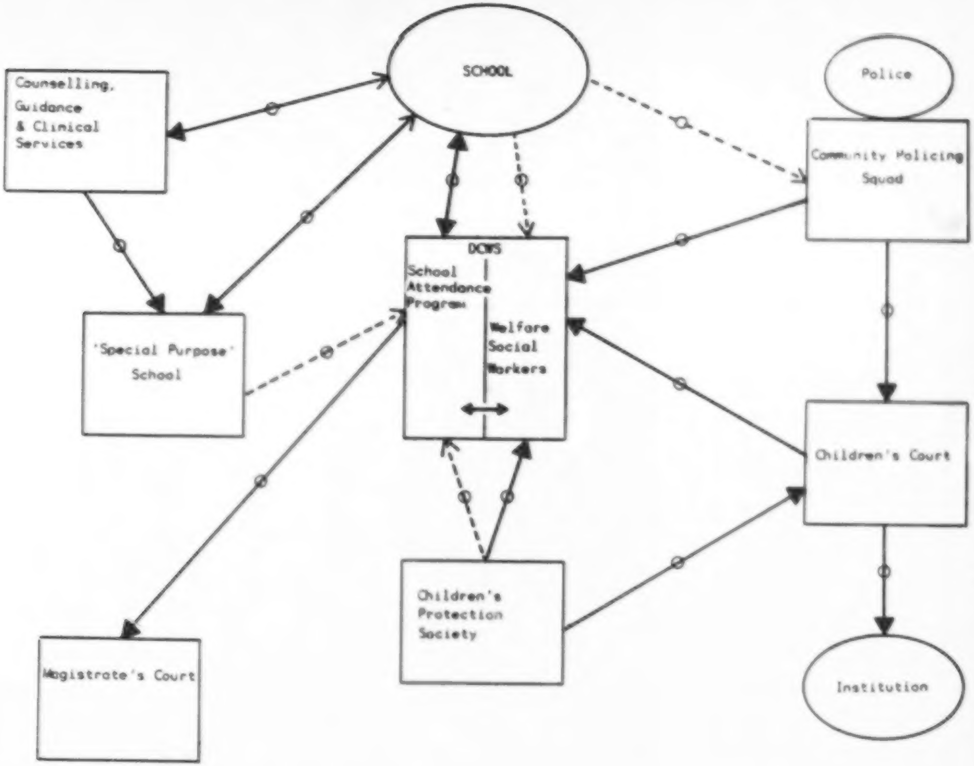
As with many other aspects of the educational process, the problems of school non-attendance (for schools) tend to be interpreted and responded to in terms of notions about the abilities and attributes of individual students. The psychological and welfare approaches to truancy have led to the implementation of specialised programs and units designed to deal with behavioural problems of individuals. Such approaches often emphasise early diagnosis for the custodial and remedial treatment of the truant (Bishop, 1980; Rock, 1980).

---

[1] See Strover (1982) for a detailed discussion of referral pathways used for responding to truant behaviour.

Figure 3.1

Simplified Referral Network for the Treatment of Truancy


SCHOOL
Police
Counselling, Guidance & Clinical Services
Community Policing Squad
DCWS
School Attendance Program
Welfare Social Workers
'Special Purpose' School
Children's Court
Children's Protection Society
Magistrate's Court
Institution
—⊖— Parental Involvement/Action
- - - - - Possible Referral Path

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It is likely, however, that in applying specialised responses to truancy, schools and other social institutions run the risk of false early identification. Procedures to identify the truant who is 'in need of special care' need to be highly accurate if they are to be employed. Even if reliable, these procedures might overformalise treatment modes and, at the same time, neglect individual student needs (McKinna and Reynolds, 1978). Further, evidence about the effectiveness of individual intervention for the treatment of deviant behaviour is weak and, as Braden (1978) indicates, may be misdirected:

> 'It has been suggested that responses invoked by teachers and others to truancy and misbehaviour are for the most part based upon the assumption that the problem results almost totally from the motivation or personality system of the child, or from a defective home environment. As a result it is assumed that the way to correct the behaviour is to direct counselling toward the individual. Acceptance of this belief accounts for the persistent call for more counsellors and special programs while the basic, underlying issues are almost entirely ignored.'
>
> (Braden, 1978:11-12)

Programs based on the identification of individual truants and the consequences for young people so identified raise the issue of labelling. Labelling theory is an interactional view involving the individual deviant and the responding institution. Institutional responses to behaviours such as truancy may create secondary deviance and the probability of young people engaging in further deviant behaviour (either truancy and/or delinquency) is likely to increase (see Lemert, 1967).

Cullen and Sreberry (1976) have indicated that the impact of labelling a student as 'dumb', a 'troublemaker' and so on, can be damaging to the individual's self-perception and result in such behaviours as truancy. Pink (1982), in summarising labelling theory, asserts that:

> 'Students successfully labelled inferior, treated as inferior, and internalising the concept of inferiors will in fact perform in an inferior fashion.'
>
> (Pink, 1982:161)

While the specific determinants of school decisions to respond in particular ways to truancy vary across schools, as well as across students within schools, there is a general set of processes that subject a proportion of the student population to such labelling (Brown, 1983). Teachers' labelling decisions tend to be biased against the lower social classes (e.g. Rist, 1970; Becker, 1970). Profiles containing specific information about children can adversely influence teacher judgements about the child (e.g. Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968; Goaldman, 1971). Children are often subjected to the negative self-fulfilling prophecies of their teachers (Pink, 1982). Academic performance and the degree to which students conform to disciplinary rules influence the relationships between teachers and students (Hargreaves, 1972).

In addition to the consequences of truancy for individual students, it has also been argued by some overseas researchers that the effects of truancy on the school can be relatively 'positive' in that secondary school truancy rates may help to relieve the overcrowding experienced in some schools and that students who are disruptive when at school no longer have to be dealt with. These views are, to some extent, reinforced by the fact that school administrators sometimes punish truancy with suspension or expulsion (Birman and Natriello, 1980; Duke, 1978).

Finally, it is of interest to note that in nineteenth century Britain, compulsory school attendance was regarded in some quarters 'as one more suffering to be borne by the poor' (Tyerman, 1958:219). Today, it may be wondered whether school non-attendance or truancy, as responded to by school and welfare authorities, is also one more 'suffering' for those young people more vulnerable to unsuccessful futures - especially those from lower social class backgrounds, lower levels of school success and with lower self-esteem.

3.7 Truancy and Juvenile Delinquency

At some time most youth engage in at least some form of deviant behaviour (Gibbons, 1982). Their acts range from minor misdemeanours to violations of criminal law. Although from a legal point of view truants have not been treated as offenders because their parents are responsible for ensuring their attendance at school, truancy has long been regarded as a form of deviant behaviour by social theorists and more generally in the community. Further, it has often been asserted that truancy is an initial behavioural step toward more serious forms of law violations. Forty years ago, Burt (1944:445) asserted that truancy was 'usually the first step on the downward stair to crime'. Since then, many researchers have reported a relationship between truancy and juvenile delinquency (e.g. Douglas _et_ _al_., 1968; Ferguson, 1952; Hersov, 1960; May, 1975; Tennent, 1971; West, 1973; West and Farrington, 1977).

Questions remain, however, about the nature of this relationship. Does truancy cause delinquency, or vice versa? Are truancy and delinquency related in the sense that they have the same underlying causes, rather than one causing the other? There are few Australian studies which have investigated the connection between truancy and juvenile delinquency (see Challinger, 1977; Greig, 1978; Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977).

Challinger (1977), in a study of Victorian police and court records, concluded that truants have greater contact with these agencies compared to non-truants. These data (1972 and 1975) revealed that the more frequent truant is more likely to 'penetrate' the juvenile justice system to the stage of court proceedings. Further, Challinger (1977:106) asserted that the findings support the 'offending-while-truant theory' (although from the data presented in that study this assertion may be questioned).

Nonetheless, there remains a need to clarify propositions about a causal connection between truancy and juvenile delinquency. For example, is it that students have greater opportunity to commit a criminal offence because of truanting or is it that truancy is an earlier manifestation of later delinquent behaviour?

In another Australian study, which examined case histories of a group of recidivist young offenders, Greig (1978) reported that 90 percent of the sample committed offences during school hours and that the vast majority of these were in association with others rather than alone. She, therefore, concluded that truant behaviour increases the likelihood of committing other offences, while truanting:

> 'If one takes into account the number of hours they reported spending away from school by wandering around aimlessly, then the commission of further offences can be viewed as an almost inevitable consequence of this leisure pattern.'
>
> (Greig, 1978:20)

Conflicting evidence may be drawn from Belson (1975) who observed that little delinquency occurs while students are truant from school. However, he suggested that truancy is causally connected to juvenile delinquency, but that its effects are indirect and mediated through peer group attachments, i.e. truants are more likely to associate with a delinquency-prone peer group (see also differential association theory, Sutherland and Cressey, 1970).

May (1975) has advanced the view that there is no simple and direct relationship from truancy to juvenile delinquency. From his findings, he contended that truancy is not an automatic pre-condition which leads to delinquency:

> '... truancy is neither a sufficient nor a necessary cause of delinquency and in fact is only peripheral to that larger social problem (i.e. delinquency).'
>
> (May 1975:106)

It is important to point out that the research literature concerning the relationship between truancy and juvenile delinquency is based largely on studies of young people identified as chronic truants or juvenile offenders who have come to the attention of police and court authorities. It is not known whether findings based on official records of the most serious and detected cases of truancy and juvenile delinquency would hold if research was directed to comparing the delinquency records of both truanting ('hidden' and 'official' groups) and non-truanting students. Such research could confirm whether or not truancy was 'the special prerogative of offenders' (Greig, 1978:20).

The more commonly held view is that there may well be a contextual, as distinct from causal, linkage between both of these troublesome behaviours. Major theories of social deviance such as control theory (Hirschi, 1969) and strain theory (Stinchcombe, 1964) have centred their viewpoints around 'the school as the critical arena in which adolescent status is forged into subsequent opportunity and adult status' (Pink, 1982:158). While in a strict sense, truancy may not be equated with juvenile delinquency, a phenomenon that encapsulates more diverse and more serious acts (as argued by Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977), there may well be merit in giving serious consideration to theories that connect school experiences with deviant behaviour. As school-based explanations have been offered for both truancy and juvenile delinquency it seems valuable to not only include the school in the model used in this study, but also to examine the context of the school in its connections with family, student and peer related factors.

3.8 The Development of A Truancy Model

Truancy has been identified through the literature as a multifaceted phenomenon related to characteristics of the individual, family, school and peer groups, as well as to the broader context of Australian society. It is apparent that a comprehensive conceptual framework, linking these arenas, is required for an explanation and understanding of truant behaviour and its relationship to juvenile delinquency.

To provide direction for the task of model development, this study has drawn upon juvenile delinquency and youth development literature in particular. The pioneering works of Coleman (1974), Pearl (1972) and Polk and Schafer (1972), among others, were considered highly relevant to an understanding of youth in contemporary society and, therefore, the study of truancy. Such literature considers the structural sources of adolescent patterns of troublesome behaviours, particularly the pervasive power of the school in the lives of youth. While a variety of theoretical perspectives (including strain, control and labelling theories) has been developed to explain the connections between schooling experiences and troublesome behaviours, more recent frameworks based on changing trends in general economic and labour market features of society have also been offered (e.g. Greenberg, 1977). Colvin and Pauly (1983), in recognising the need for placement of the school in a broader economic and political context, state that the particular features of schooling experiences should not be neglected. Further, Polk (1983) has argued the need for an integrated theory by drawing upon different perspectives which emphasise particular features of schools and schooling:

> 'Labour market and strain theories place the school inside the framework of wider institutional forces. These wider forces, such as the labor market, create the basic framework for the tracking systems, which develop the major school labels that define student roles. From the labelling experiences, various peer groupings emerge. Taken together, institutional and peer experiences establish the network of social bonds that results in either stronger or weaker ties to conformity. Spanning all these perspectives, an integrated theory may explain why the school seems to be so important in adolescent life, why it is that such selection procedures as tracking and grading have their power in the prediction of delinquency, and how these school processes interact with distinctive peer groupings to create trouble, rebellion, and delinquency.'
>
> (Polk, 1983: 695-696)

Taking such theoretical issues into account, Polk et al. (1981) examined the influences of different institutional arenas (i.e. family, school and peer groupings) on delinquent behaviour, using a longitudinal panel design. The present research study modifies and extends the analytical framework of Polk et al. (1981) which was referred to as a theory of structural commitments.

The central and general view of the truancy model guiding this study is that students who are part of the mainstream success flow of the school are more likely to be committed to the conventional order of the school and, therefore, are less likely to engage in troublesome behaviours.[2] The key elements of this success flow have been identified in the literature as family background, school success and presumed futures of students. While family background (which constitutes the status origins of young people) has been repeatedly demonstrated to have a relationship to school performance, a more critical aspect of success in school, with respect to truancy, concerns the present and future status positions of youth. Schools are organised in terms of features such as the competitive academic curriculum and streaming practices which continually draw distinctions between successful and unsuccessful students (present status positions). Further, success in school provides a future-oriented function in that successful students are more likely to move into successful futures (e.g. higher status occupations). Taking the model a step further, those students who are part of the success flow are also less likely to drift into peer groups containing unsuccessful and uncommitted students. Involvement in troublesome behaviour is a more likely option for such peer groups which in general are less tied to and more alienated from the conventional order of school and the purposes and functions of schooling.

---

[2] Connell et al. (1982) provide evidence that some students in the mainstream are not committed to the conventional order of the school. These students may be more likely to passively 'accept' the order of the school rather than truanting.

Figure 3.2 represents the truancy conceptual framework derived from research literature. The blocks of this diagram refer to variables which have been described in Chapter 2. Their arrangement is not random but was established according to an ordering of theoretical importance and temporal priority. The diagram identifies the three major institutional arenas (i.e. family, school, peers) which are seen as providing essential supports for school and future success, and commitment to conventional behaviour among students or, conversely, engagement in troublesome behaviours.

Family influences of social class and support for education form the first major arena. Structural features of schools which have been incorporated into the second arena include socioeconomic level, school climate, school size and school attendance practices and procedures.

Included in the school arena are three individual-level dimensions relating to school commitments. Two of these are concerned with students' positions in the success flow of the school, i.e. achievement and occupational aspirations, and the other refers to students' attitudes to school and schooling, i.e. school importance.

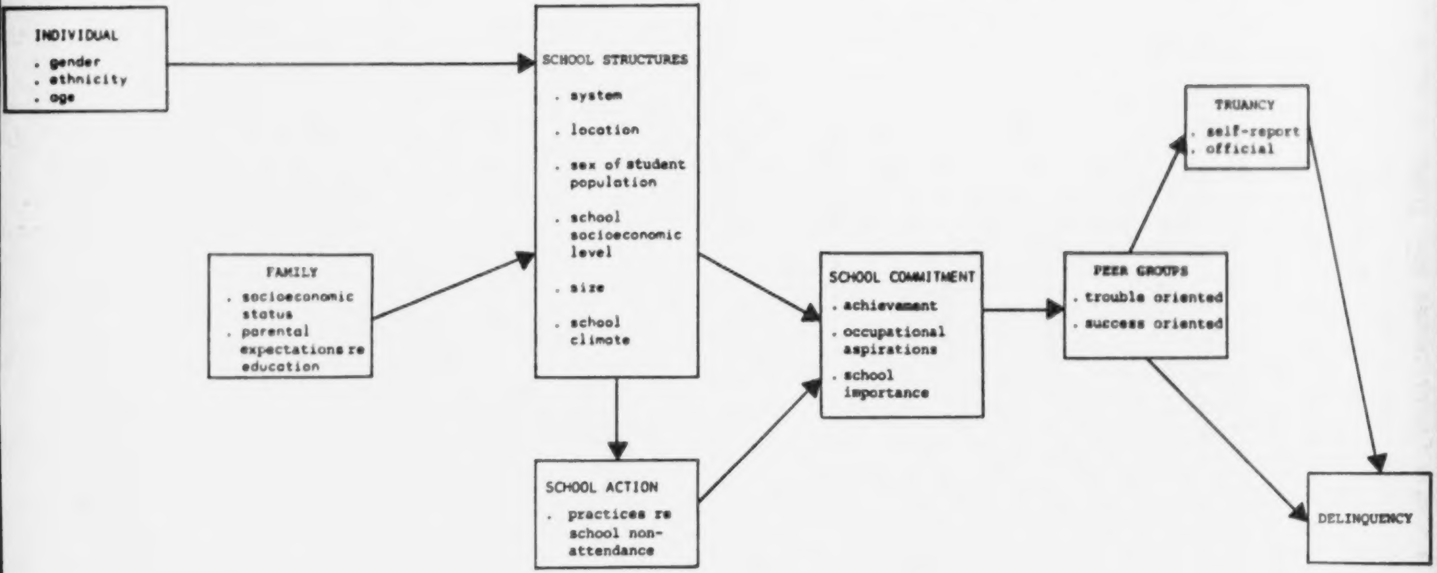
The third arena is a single factor termed peer groups relating to student attachment to trouble versus success-oriented friends.

While the centrality of the school in the lives of young people is emphasised, the model integrates family and peer group influences in order to provide a structurally based explanation of truant and delinquent behaviours. According to the model, the sources of a lack of commitment to conventional behaviour among students stem primarily from institutional factors which make it more difficult for some to succeed.

Before presenting the longitudinal data it is important to note that the factors addressed in this report may have limited explanatory power with respect to truant behaviour. As Denne (1980) has point out, truancy is an umbrella term for a wide range of behaviours making their measurement, in a 'unidimensional' sense, extremely difficult. Nevertheless, it is considered that the proposed model will throw some light on the complex pattern of causal influences contributing to troublesome behaviours.

Figure 3.2

A Simplified Truancy Model



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CHAPTER 4

THE INCIDENCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUANCY

This chapter draws upon longitudinal data to describe the incidence of truancy among panel members and a range of individual and institutional characteristics of these young people. Comparisons are made between those young people who had never been truants and those who had engaged in truant behaviour to various extents.

4.1 The Extent of Truancy

What was the general pattern of involvement in truant behaviour? Two issues need to be addressed in order to describe the pattern of involvement. The first of these is the incidence of truancy across the years of secondary school and the second concerns the prevelance of truant behaviour among secondary school students.

Data concerning the incidence of truancy in various years of secondary school are presented in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. With regard to self-reported truant behaviour, the general patterns of the 'frequency of truancy' appear to be similar across Years 9 to 11 (see Table 4.1). The proportions of students who reported truant behaviour decreased as the frequency of truancy increased. Some differences are apparent for the categories 'never' and 'very little'; 40 percent of the panel reported some degree of involvement in truancy in Year 9 whereas by Year 10, 47 percent of those still attending school reported some degree of truancy. In Year 11, a post-compulsory year of schooling, the pattern is almost identical to that observed for Year 10. It should also be noted that those young people who may be considered chronic truants at any of these year levels (say once per week or more), constituted a very small percentage of the panel in any given year, a proportion which was consistent across these years (approximately 5%).

TABLE 4.1

Self-Reported Truancy for Years 9 to 11

(percentage of respondents)

	1980 Year 9 (N=1794)	1981 Year 10 (N=1740)*	1982 Year 11 (N=1474)*
Frequency of Truancy:			
Never	60	53	53
Very little	27	32	32
Once, twice per month	8	9	9
Once per week	3	3	4
More than once per week	2	2	2
TOTAL	100	100	100

* By 1981, 3 percent of wave 3 respondents had left secondary school. By 1982, 18 percent of wave 3 respondents had left secondary school.

The official data concerning unexplained school non-attendance, provide confirmatory evidence for the patterns of truancy found through the self-report measure, although it is recognised that these data refer to different groups of the original panel (See Table 4.2).[1] According to these school attendance data, the peak year of student involement in truancy occurs in Year 9, an average of 57 percent from terms 1 to 3 compared with 48 percent in Year 10 and 43 percent in Year 11. The peak involvement in truancy observed from the self-report data, occurs in Years 10 and 11. The reasons for this difference are likely to be due to differences in definitions of what constitutes truancy, as well as

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[1] Analysis restricted to the group for whom data on both measures of truancy were available revealed that there were no differences, beyond 1 or 2 percentage points, betweeen the patterns reported here for each measure and those obtained for the restricted group.

Table 4.2
Official Truancy for Years 7 to 11
(percentage of respondents)

		1978			1979			1980			1981			1982	
		Year 7			Year 8			Year 9			Year 10			Year 11	
	Term 1 (N=1475)	Term 2 (N=1530)	Term 3 (N=1621)	Term 1 (N=1621)	Term 2 (N=1621)	Term 3 (N=1621)	Term 1 (N=1517)	Term 2 (N=1498)	Term 3 (N=1447)	Term 1 (N=1691)	Term 2 (N=1659)	Term 3 (N=1458)	Term 1 (N=1307)	Term 2 (N=1272)	Term 3 (N=1016)
Frequency of Truancy:															
Never	65	58	51	51	45	44	45	44	39	59	49	48	56	51	64
Very Little (1-2 days)	25	24	27	29	29	32	32	29	28	24	27	25	26	21	19
Little (3-8 days)	9	15	20	18	23	21	20	21	28	14	19	22	17	21	13
Frequent (9-12 days)	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	1	4	1
Very Frequent (13 or more)	0	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	3	2	3	3
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

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problems of reliability, over-reporting, under-reporting and sample differences. While it is not possible to ascertain which measure is more accurate, it is of some significance that schools record more truant behaviour in Year 9 than is reported by students, whereas the reverse occurs in Year 10 and 11. Perhaps schools are more active in their surveillance and recording of truant behaviour during the compulsory years of schooling.

As was the case for the self-report data the proportion of students who were recorded as 'frequent - very frequent' truants (9 days or more per term) is fairly stable across Years 9 to 11, but constitutes a very small proportion of the panel (approximately 5%, see Table 4.2). The data also reveal a fairly consistent trend in truancy rates across school terms within each year. For all years apart from 1982 (Year 11), the percentage of students who were recorded as truants increased from term 1 to term three.

Based on self-report and official data it would appear that somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of secondary school students engage in truancy to various degrees at each year level of secondary school. However, chronic truants, as defined by the highest frequency of truancy (a category roughly equivalent for both self-report and official data, i.e. does it once per week or more) appear to constitute no more than about 2 percent of secondary school students in any given year level, from Year 7 to Year eleven.

What proportion of male and female students engage in truancy at some time during their secondary school careers? Data concerning the 'maximum frequency of truancy' reported by and recorded for male and female members of the panel provide estimates of the prevalence of truant behaviour (see Table 4.3).[2] For both self-report and official data, no statistically significant differences ($p<.01$) were found. However, it may be observed from the self-report data (Table 4.3) that:

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[2] This table and various subsequent tables use the labels of official data categories for both measures. It should be recognised that these categories do not directly correspond to the self-report categories used in the wave 3 questionnaire, but are approximations. See Chapter 2 for further details.

- The pattern for males and females was very similar across the frequency categories, with 44 percent of females reporting that they had never truanted compared to 39 percent of males
- Of female students, 9 percent reported frequent or very frequent (i.e. once a week or more) involvement in truancy at some time during Years 9 to 11, compared with 12 percent of male students.

The official data in this table indicate that:

- The patterns of school recorded truancy for males and females were similar; significantly, virtually all (98%) of the panel were classified according to official records as having been absent without excuse on at least one occasion at some time during Years 7 to 11
- The majority of the group (53%) had truanted for between 3-8 days at some stage during their secondary schooling
- About one-quarter of the panel (24%) had been frequent or very frequent (i.e. 9 or more days per term) truants at some stage between Years 7 to Eleven.

The two measures highlight differences with respect to findings about the relative proportions of students who are classified as being involved in truancy to varying extents. Self-report data indicate that the majority of students (58%) report engagement in some level of truancy at some time during Years 9 to Eleven. The official data, on the other hand, classifies virtually all students (98%) as having been involved in some level of truancy at some time during Years 7 to Eleven.[3]

The large discrepancy between the self-report and official estimates may be explained in several ways. First, there is only partial correspondence in the years for which data are available (i.e. school records include Years 7 and 8). Second, because the 'maximum frequency of truancy' measure is used, a student who had only one day's unexplained

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[3] Field notes about the 'quality' of school attendance records at each school indicate that it is likely that official measures of truancy are spuriously inflated because records of some unexplained absences which are subsequently explained are not amended.

TABLE 4.3

Maximum Self-Reported and Official Truancy by Gender

(percentage of respondents)

	GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
A. Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=867)	(N=940)	(N=1807)
Never	39	44	42
Very little (1 -2 days per term)	35	33	34
Little (once, twice per month)	15	14	14
Frequent (once per week)	7	5	6
Very frequent (more than once per week)	5	4	5
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (d.f. = 4) = 6.96, N.S.			
B. Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=912)	(N=1105)	(N=2017)
Never	2	3	2
Very Little (1-2 days per term)	21	23	22
Little (3-8 days per term)	54	52	53
Frequent (9-12 days per term)	11	12	12
Very frequent (13 or more days per term)	13	10	12
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (4) = 7.84, N.S.			

absence according to available school records, for example, would be classified in the category 'very little' and therefore included in the truant population. Third, schools and students define, and therefore report, truant behaviour in different ways. Fourth, it is likely the measures suffer from validity and reliability problems, in terms of both the precise measurement of truant behaviour and the operational definition of truancy.

At what stage during secondary school do truants reach a peak level of engagement in truant behaviour? This question can be considered through an examination of the data presented in Table 4.4. From the self-report data it appears that, compared with Years 10 and 11, the majority of students reported peak involvement at Year 9 across all frequency levels (although this was less so for the 'frequent' group). Irrespective of truancy level, 52 percent of truanting students reported peak involvement by Year Nine. The official data provide some clarification of the year level at which maximum involvement in truancy is reached (see Table 4.4).

Although based on different groups of the panel, these data suggest that peak involvement for the majority of students, at all levels of truancy, had occurred by Year 9; from the official data it appears that, when Years 7 and 8 are taken into account, there is a more even distribution of the proportion of students who reach peak involvement in truant behaviour across the secondary school years. Of some significance for the more frequent truant groups, (i.e. 'frequent' and 'very frequent') it appears that for a greater proportion of this group, peak involvement is more likely to occur towards the end of the compulsory years of schooling.

When examining both truancy measures for the same time period (i.e. Years 9 to 11), a lack of correspondence was found ($r = 0.27$, gamma = 0.31). From Table 4.5 it may be observed that the most noticeable point of 'agreement' between the two measures is for the category 'little' truancy (55% of the group self-reported and were recorded in this classification). If self-report estimates are assumed to be more accurate, it appears that schools over-report the higher levels and under-report the lower levels of truancy.

TABLE 4.4

Year Level of Peak Involvement by Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported and Official Truancy

(percentage of respondents)

	MAXIMUM FREQUENCY OF TRUANCY				
	Very Little	Little	Frequent	Very Frequent	Total
A. Self-Report Year Level of Peak Involvement:	(N=611)	(N=259)	(N=105)	(N=83)	(N=1058)
1980 (Year 9)	58	48	36	40	52
1981 (Year 10)	23	28	29	36	26
1982 (Year 11	19	24	35	25	22
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100
B. Official Year Level of Peak Involvement:	(N=432)	(N=1060)	(N=248)	(N=235)	(N=1975)
1978 (Year 7)	17	14	10	9	14
1979 (Year 8)	29	21	17	11	21
1980 (Year 9)	16	22	26	30	22
1981 (Year 10)	20	23	25	26	22
1982 (Year 11	17	20	21	24	20
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

TABLE 4.5

Maximum Official Truancy by Maximum Self-Reported Truancy in Years 9-11 Combined

(percentage of respondents)

	SELF-REPORTED TRUANCY					
	Never	Very Little	Little	Frequent	Very Frequent	Total
Official Truancy:	(N=623)	(N=522)	(N=225)	(N=93)	(N=63)	(N=1526)
Never	9	5	5	5	3	7
Very Little	36	28	18	17	5	28
Little	45	51	55	43	38	48
Frequent	6	8	12	16	22	9
Very frequent	5	7	10	18	32	8
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Chi-square (16) = 144.49, p<.001

The preceding data establish that a sizeable proportion of secondary school students either admit or are recorded as being involved in truancy. The next issue to consider is whether or not this behaviour is persistent or episodic: 'Do those who engage in truancy continue this involvement through secondary school?' and if so, 'What explanations may be offered for this pattern?'.

From Figure 4.1 it is possible to begin to address these questions. This diagram is a representation of the movement of Year 9 students into various self-reported frequency levels of truancy at Year 10 and their movement from Year 10 to Year 11 or out of school. Three frequency levels of self-reported truancy were selected to illustrate this movement (namely 'very little', 'little' and 'frequent' truancy in Year 10). These levels were selected to minimise regression effects which would be more likely for the extreme categories.

Three substantive points can be made from the figure. For students with a low level of involvement in truant behaviour at Year 10, the Year 9 truancy level was likely to be either the same or less; i.e. they were predominantly 'never' or 'very little' truants in Year Nine. A similar pattern is evident from the group who reported 'little' truancy in Year Ten. However, for the Year 10 'frequent' group, the students were drawn from a broader range of levels of truant behaviour. Furthermore, for the 'frequent' group only 21 percent persisted at this level in Year 10, compared with 35 percent of the 'little' group and 57 percent of the 'very little' group persisting at these levels. In other words, persistence at a particular level of truancy from Year 9 to Year 10 appears to be more likely at lower levels of truant behaviour.

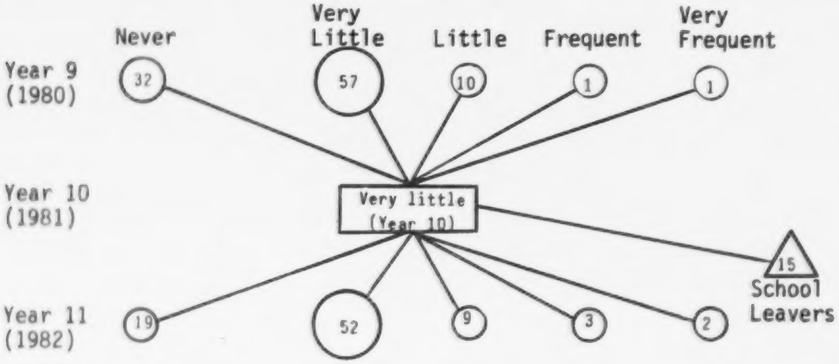
What happens between Year 10 and Year Eleven? It may be observed that persistence at each of the three levels from Years 10 to 11 decreases when frequency of truant behaviour increases (52% of the 'very little', 27% of the 'little' and 18% of the 'frequent' groups). It should be recognised, however, that at each truancy level a proportion of students leave school during or after Year 10. This proportion tends to increase as frequency of involvement in truant behaviour at Year 10 increases (15% 'very little', 21% 'little', 24% 'frequent').

FIGURE 4.1

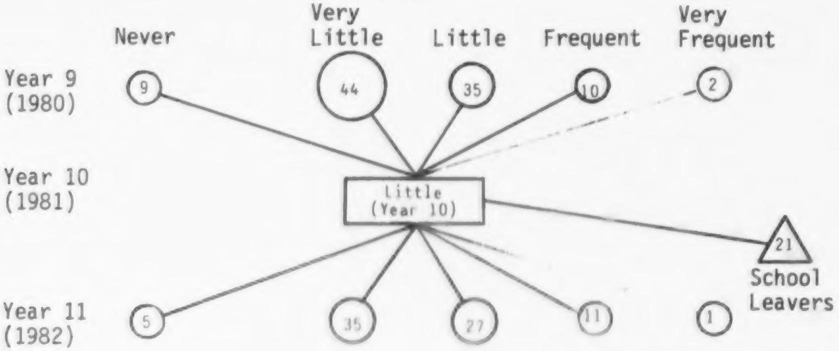
Changing Patterns of Self-Reported Truancy

(percentages reported)

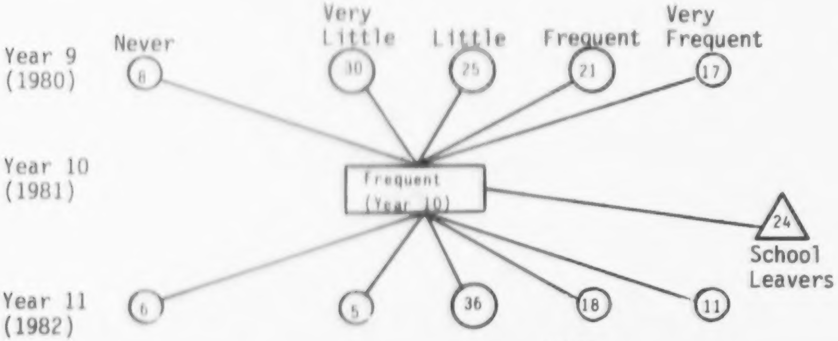
A. Very Little Truancy in Year 10 (N=546)



B. Little Truancy in Year 10 (N=161)



C. Frequent Truancy in Year 10 (N=54)



This example using self-report data suggests that for many young people, involvement in truancy is episodic in two senses. First, some students who reported involvement in truancy at Year 10 (at each of the three levels selected) reported no involement in Year 9 and/or no involvement at Year Eleven. Second, truancy also appears to be episodic in that many students report less involvement in Year 11 compared with their involvement reported for Year Ten. For example, 40 percent of students who reported 'little' truancy for Year 10 reported less involvement for Year 11, this was also the case for 47 percent of the 'frequent' group for Year Ten. In interpreting the changing patterns of self-reported truancy over these three years of secondary school it must also be recognised that there is loss from each group from Years 9 to 11 due to students leaving school.

As there is no simple way of repeating this exercise for the official data which spans 15 data points (i.e. 3 school terms for 5 years), the strategy adopted was to examine the average correlation of unexplained absences between measures taken at various time intervals.[4] The average correlation between official truancy measures taken one term apart, across Years 7 to 11, was 0.44.

Corresponding correlations of 0.32, 0.27 and 0.20 were found for measures taken 2, 3 and 4 school terms apart respectively. This reduction in the size of the average correlation continues as the number of school terms between measures increases and appears to reach a plateau at approximately 0.16. Although only providing tentative support, the change in average correlation when the time measure is increased suggests that the patterns of engagement in truancy according to offical records are not consistent across school terms, and particularly from one year to the next (i.e. a difference of 3 or more school terms). In other words, using school records for a particular time period to identify truants may

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4. The weighted average within-group correlations were calculated for groups identified by the number of school terms between truancy estimates (number of days recorded as unexplained absences). For example, correlations for estimates one term apart were calculated across the terms (i.e. 4 correlations) and a weighted average computed.

bear little relationship to these students' earlier or subsequent school attendance behaviour. In this regard, official histories of truancy taken over a long period of time would be needed if schools and others wish to identify particular students as persistent truants.

The evidence presented to date suggests that truant behaviour for many young people is episodic, even for those identified as having some history of frequent involvement. However, the data of this study do not permit an examination of whether such apparent behavioural reform arises out of the maturational development of young people or stems from organisational responses of schools to student non-attendance. Some reference to the literature may be appropriate here. Labelling theory suggests it is unlikely that organisational responses of schools to truancy contribute to this reform (e.g. see Pink, 1982). These responses may, however, act as a deterrent although the findings from the case studies indicate that, from a student perspective, school organisational structures designed to deter truant behaviour are not particularly effective or valuable. The notion of maturation, while difficult to define, has not been adequately accounted for in deviancy literature. It is most likely that reform in truant behaviour, as with delinquent behaviour, is a complex process whereby constraints against continued involvement in the behaviour arise from interactions between individual characteristics of students and organisational practices of schools. Continued truancy is likely to place students at greater risk of academic failure (and therefore of maintaining or entering the success flow of schools). Whether truant behaviour is more likely to occur among young people who are not part of the success flow is a major issue which is considered in the following sections of this chapter, as well as Chapters 5 and 6.

Finally, the case studies (see Student Perspectives on Truancy) suggest that for some students truancy is an episodic behaviour that reflects day-to-day decisions to withdraw from certain subjects and teachers. For others, however, truancy may represent a rational response to their structurally induced exclusion from mainstream schooling activities.

4.2 Individual Characteristics and Truancy

The year level data of the previous section provide an indication of the relationship between age and truant behaviour for both males and females. Ethnicity data pertaining to the longitudinal study panel indicate that the patterns of truancy for three nationality groups (Australian-born, Born in English-speaking country and Born in non-English-speaking country) were very similar for both truancy measures. There were no significant differences in rates of truancy between these groupings.

4.3 Family Characteristics and Truancy

Measures of two relevant family background characteristics were also obtained through the wave 1 (1980) survey of the longitudinal study. The first, socioeconomic status (SES), provides a measure of the status of the family in terms of parents' occupational positions and educational attainment. This background characteristic may be of particular relevance to the role of families in the educational activities of young people. The data are presented in Table 4.6.

Socioeconomic Status

While there appears to be little general difference in the frequency of self-reported truancy across the three categories of SES (as supported by non-significant chi-square value at $p<.01$), 45 percent of young people from a 'high' SES background reported that they had 'never' truanted compared with 40 percent 'medium' and 37 percent of 'low' SES background students.

While SES level does not provide sharp distinctions between levels of official truancy, a slightly lower percentage of "high" SES young people were recorded as 'frequent' and 'very frequent' truants (20%) compared with the other two SES categories (26% 'low', 25% 'medium').

TABLE 4.6

Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Socioeconomic Status at Wave 1 (1980)

(percentage of respondents)

	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS		
	Low	Medium	High
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=537)	(N=601)	(N=605)
Never	37	40	45
Very little	35	36	32
Little	16	15	13
Frequent	6	6	6
Very frequent	6	4	4
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) = 13.13, N.S.			
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=606)	(N=697)	(N=630)
Never	3	1	2
Very little	20	21	24
Little	51	54	54
Frequent	12	14	9
Very frequent	14	11	11
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) = 22.47, p<.005			

Parents' educational expectations

Parents' educational aspirations (as perceived by panel members in 1980) for the self-report data (see Table 4.7) indicate that a higher percentage of those young people who believed that their parents wanted them to leave school before the end of Year 12 (66%) had truanted compared with both other groups (57% in both cases). A comparison of the 'before Year 12' and 'end of Year 12' groups, however, indicated that there was not a significant relationship ($p<.01$ level) between the stage at which young people believed their parents wanted them to leave school and truancy. The frequency of official truancy was similar for each group (see Table 4.7). These data suggest that the two measures of family chacteristics are informative in terms of distinguishing between young people who engage in various levels of truant behaviour depending which truancy measure is used. Official data suggest a weak but significant trend of declining truancy as SES level increases. While self-report data appear to indicate a similar trend the relationship was not significant. For parents' educational expectations, lower expectations were associated with higher self-reported involvement in truancy, but there was no such significant relationship found for official data. These findings seem consistent with the findings of the case studies which suggest that, for the majority of truants, family factors play a relatively minor role.

4.4 School Characteristics and Truancy

The research literature discussed in Chapter 3 emphasised the importance of the school in the phenomenon of truancy. Three aspects of schooling were identified as potentially relevant to an examination of the relationship between schools and truant behaviour: structural features (such as system, size and general school climate), success at school, and student attitudes to schooling. The relationships between 'maximum frequency of truancy' and these aspects of schools and schooling are explored in this section.

4.4.1 Structural Features of Schools

In considering the structural features of the schools attended by the panel in 1980 (as Year 9 students), the relationships between the extent of truancy and the seven school characteristics described in Chapter 2 were examined. In the case of some of these data, only textual comments are provided.

TABLE 4.7

Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Parents' Educational Expectations at Wave 1 (1980)

(percentage of respondents)

	STAGE YOUNG PEOPLE BELIEVED PARENT(S) WANTED THEM TO LEAVE SCHOOL		
	Before Year 12	End of Year 12	Don't Know
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=340)	(N=1065)	(N=333)
Never	34	43	43
Very little	38	34	29
Little	16	14	14
Frequent	8	6	6
Very frequent	5	4	8
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) = 21.69, p<.01			
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=370)	(N=1181)	(N=380)
Never	1	2	3
Very little	20	21	23
Little	54	54	48
Frequent	11	11	13
Very frequent	13	11	13
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) = 8.23, N.S.			

School System, Location and Sex of Student Population

The data indicate that the most significant variable was school system. These data (see Table 4.8) indicate that:

- For self-reported data, students who attended schools in the non-government systems were substantially over-represented in the 'never' category (50% catholic, 68% independent) and were under-represented in the combined 'frequent - very frequent' categories (e.g. technical 15%, independent 8%)
- Substantial differences were observed for official truancy data, especically noticeable being the difference between government schools and independent schools with respect to the proportion of students classified as 'frequent-very frequent' truants (e.g. government high schools 27%, independent 3%). The difference between government high and independent schools was significant at the p<.001 level.

TABLE 4.8

Maximum Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy By School System at Wave 1 (1980)

(percentage of respondents)

	SCHOOL SYSTEM			
	Government		Catholic	Independent
	High	Technical		
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=1015)	(N=355)	(N=276)	(N=161)
Never	38	33	50	68
Very little	38	34	30	17
Little	14	19	14	8
Frequent	6	8	5	4
Very frequent	5	7	1	4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100
Chi-square (12) = 88.26, p<.001				
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=1130)	(N=403)	(N=303)	(N=182)
Never	3	1	3	2
Very little	22	18	20	34
Little	48	58	61	60
Frequent	13	12	10	1
Very frequent	14	11	7	2
TOTAL	100	100	100	100
Chi-square (12) = 81.89, p<.001				

While problems exist with respect to the degree to which the self-report and official levels of truancy may be considered similar, and because of the different approaches taken by schools to record unexplained non-attendance, the data nonetheless do provide two views of the extent of truancy in different types of schools. In each school system, other than that of the independent schools, attendance records suggest that there is a greater proportion of 'frequent-very frequent' truants compared with student self-report data. Interestingly, independent schools appear to under-estimate the extent of engagement in more frequent levels of truant behaviour compared with estimates obtained from students in those schools.

While no significant relationship (at p<.01) was found between school location and self-reported truancy, a significant relationship (p<.001) was found in the official data. Metropolitan schools recorded a greater proportion of students who have been identified in this study as 'very frequent' truants, compared with country-urban and country schools (14%, 7%, 6% respectively). With regard to the sex of the student population attending the longitudinal study schools, self-reported data revealed that 51 percent of students who attended all female schools in 1980 reported that they had 'never' truanted, whereas 47 percent of those from all male schools and 38 percent of students from coeducational schools reported no engagement in truancy in Years 9 to Eleven. According to these data, however, the proportions of students from coeducational schools in the 'frequent' and 'very frequent' categories were not significantly different (at p<.01 level) from the proportions in these categories for the single sex schools. A cross tabulation of official truancy data by sex of student population provided a non-significant chi-square (p<.01) and 25 percent of students attending coeducational schools in 1980 were identified as 'frequent-very frequent' truants compared with 21 percent of students attending all male schools and 20 percent of students attending all female schools.

These data concerning school system, location and sex of student population should be interpreted with caution due to the interactive nature of these variables.

School Action and School Size

Another theoretically important structural feature in the investigation relates to the practices and procedures used by schools to monitor and respond to truant behaviour (see Table 4.9). Two major observations from this table are:

- As the intensity of school practices and procedures increases, the proportion of students who admitted to involvement in truancy increases

- The influence of the intensity of school action is even more noticeable in the official data. In the longitudinal study schools which were classified as 'intensive' according to the school action data, 45 percent of the panel were identified as 'frequent - very frequent' truants at some time during their schooling compared with only 15 percent of students who attended schools which were classified as 'non-intensive'.

These findings concerning the relationship between school non-attendance procedures and self-reported and official measures of unexplained non-attendance are consistent with studies which have found that 'custodially oriented' schools which impose intensive social control and use structured procedures for responding to truancy are those which have higher rates of truancy (e.g. see Reid and Kendall, 1982; Rutter *et al.*, 1979). It should be noted that the measure of intensity of school action included items concerned with the frequency of recording absences and procedures for following-up unexplained non-attendance. Consequently, the differences reported in Table 4.9 may be due to the extent and/or efficiency of schools in monitoring and officially recording non-attendance.

TABLE 4.9

Maximum Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by School Action at Wave 3 (1983)

(by percentage of respondents)

	SCHOOL ACTION		
	Non-intensive	Average	Intensive
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=736)	(N=691)	(N=374)
Never	47	40	34
Very little	33	33	38
Little	13	15	15
Frequent	5	6	7
Very frequent	3	6	7
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) =29.65, p<.001			
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=830)	(N=721)	(N=466)
Never	1	6	1
Very little	30	29	8
Little	54	53	46
Frequent	9	7	19
Very frequent	6	6	26
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) = 286.20, p<.001			

Surprisingly, given the literature relating to school size and truancy (e.g. Barker and Gump, 1964; Reynolds et al., 1980) and the correlation between school action and school size found in this study ($r = 0.62$), there were no direct relationships between school size and self-reported and official truant behaviour.

Two other structural features of schools, school socioeconomic level and school climate, are composite variables obtained by averaging respondents' scores within each of the 25 longitudinal study schools (see Chapter 2). The constituent variables, family background, attitudes to school, attitudes to teachers and occupational aspirations, are dealt with separately in this chapter, while the composite variables will be addressed by the path analysis reported in Chapter 6.

4.4.2 Student Commitment to School and Schooling

Of major significance in much of the contemporary literature concerning truancy is the role played by the school. Accordingly, this study examined two social psychological factors relating to the school. The first relates to the success flow in schools in terms of the present and likely future status of young people. Two measures of students' placements within these success flows are provided by the school success and occupational aspirations variables. The second factor, closely akin to the notion of student commitment to school and schooling (and argued to result from the status of students within schools determined by school practices such as grading and streaming), is measured by two subscales of the school importance variable. These subscales, attitudes to school and attitudes to teachers, are presumed to gauge students' perceptions about the importance and value of schooling.

School Success and Occupational Aspirations

For both the self-report and official data there is no consistent trend between the truancy measures and students' perceptions of their own success at school compared with that of their peers (see Table 4.10). For both measures, students who perceive their success to be 'better than most', compared with other students, are less likely to report or be officially recorded as 'frequent-very frequent' truants. A chi-square

TABLE 4.10

Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by School Success at Wave 1 (1980)

(by percentage of respondents)

	PERCEIVED SUCCESS COMPARED WITH OTHER STUDENTS		
	Below Average	Average	Better than Most
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=131)	(N=1081)	(N=526)
Never	31	39	47
Very Little	33	34	35
Little	18	15	12
Frequent	9	7	4
Very frequent	10	5	2
TOTAL	100	100	100

Chi-square (8) = 30.45, P<.001

	Below Average	Average	Better than Most
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=160)	(N=1184)	(N=582)
Never	2	2	2
Very little	17	21	24
Little	50	52	56
Frequent	12	13	10
Very frequent	19	13	8
TOTAL	100	100	100

Chi-square (8) = 25.11, p<.005

test for this group compared with the remaining students provided a significant value (p<.001) for each measure. Members of the 'frequent - very frequent' truanting group were significantly more likely to perceive their success as 'below average' than were other students.

Whether this relationship regarding present success also holds for likely future status can be addressed by considering the occupational aspirations of students (at wave 1) and their involvement in truancy. These data revealed no significant relationship (at p<.01) and are not presented in tabular form. Nonetheless the data were in a similar direction to those for school success, i.e. those students who aspired to professional and managerial jobs (higher status occupations) were less represented in the self-reported and official frequency levels of truancy compared with those who aspired to lower status occupations.

These findings suggest that truancy is associated with the present school status of students but is not related to their perceived occupational futures when they are in the early years of secondary school. Whether the effects of truancy on perceived occupational futures are mediated by present school success and whether involvement in truancy reduces the likelihood of attaining high occupational status in the future are issues addressed in subsequent chapters of this report.

Attitudes to School and Teachers

For the purposes of this research attitudes to school and teachers were regarded as indicating another feature of students' commitment to school and schooling. These two subscales are represented separately in Table 4.11 and 4.12 and, as mentioned previously, were combined to form a scale called School Importance which was used in the path analysis reported in Chapter 6.

Self-report data (see Table 4.11) indicate that there is a negative monotonic relationship between attitudes to school and self-reported truant behaviour; students with negative attitudes toward school at Year 9 were more likely to be over represented in the 'frequent-very frequent' categories of self-reported truancy (chi-square significant at p< .001).

TABLE 4.11

Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Attitudes to School at Wave 1 (1980)

(by percentage of respondents)

	ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL		
	Negative	Unsure	Positive
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=140)	(N=552)	(N=1048)
Never	26	39	44
Very little	24	33	36
Little	22	15	13
Frequent	10	7	5
Very frequent	19	6	2
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-square (8) = 104.84, p<.001			
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=161)	(N=595)	(N=1172)
Never	1	3	3
Very Little	19	21	27
Little	44	53	53
Frequent	16	14	8
Very Frequent	20	10	9
TOTAL	100	100	100
Chi-Square (8) = 45.07, p<.001			

These observations are generally confirmed by the official data (see Table 4.11). While 17 percent of those students with positive attitudes to school were officially recorded as 'frequent-very frequent' truants at some time during Years 7 to 11, this classification accounted for 36 percent of students with negative attitudes.

A similar pattern of significant findings may be observed for attitutdes to teachers (see Table 4.12):

- Of students who had positive attitudes towards teachers in Year 9, 39 percent reported some involvement in truancy compared with 70 percent of students who had negative attitudes toward teachers. Further, students with negative attitudes were 4 times more likely to engage in 'frequent-very frequent' truancy compared with peers who held positive attitudes (16% and 4% respectively).
- It should be noted that 28 percent of students with negative attitudes were recorded by schools as chronic truants (i.e. 'frequent - very frequent') some time during Years 7 to 11 compared with 15 percent of those with positive attitudes.

It is relevant to note that the majority of young people had a positive attitude towards school. These data support the previous observations that bivariate relationships between truancy and the background characteristics considered in this study are generally present whether truancy is measured by self-report questionnaire items or official school attendance records.

4.5 Peer Group Attachment and Truancy

In addition to family, institutional and social psychological factors, another dimension frequently associated with truancy in the literature is concerned with adolescent peer group relations. As Wilson and Braithwaite (1977) suggested from their investigation:

> 'Truancy is very much a peer group activity. The essays that students wrote for us on truancy emphasise the importance of peer group approval pressures to "join in with your mates". The significance of pressures from friends to "join in" is possibly reflected in the fact that those who were truants were considerably more likely to have friends who have truanted.'
>
> (Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977:89)

TABLE 4.12

Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Attitudes to Teachers at Wave 1 (1980)

(by percentage of respondents)

	ATTITUDES TO TEACHERS Negative	 Unsure	 Positive
Maximum Frequency Self-Report:	(N=480)	(N=1006)	(N=253)
Never	30	41	61
Very little	33	37	27
Little	21	13	9
Frequent	9	6	2
Very frequent	7	4	2
TOTAL	100	100	100

Chi-square (8) = 95.66, p<.001

	Negative	Unsure	Positive
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=528)	(N=1113)	(N=288)
Never	3	3	4
Very Little	23	25	25
Little	47	53	56
Frequent	15	9	8
Very frequent	13	11	7
TOTAL	100	100	100

Chi-square (8) = 24.98, p<.005

An examination of the role played by the peer group in fostering truant behaviour is possible by using results of the wave 3 (1983) questionnaire survey. First, it should be pointed out that 58 percent of students who self-reported engagement in truancy responded that they usually truanted with friends.

Second, an important feature of peer groups is whether truants are more likely to be attached to peer groups made up of trouble-oriented peers (i.e. less academically successful, more likely to be in trouble, early school leavers and more likely to be truants) or success-oriented peers. An examination of the relationships between the truancy measures and an overall index of peer group orientation, (see Table 4.13) indicates that:

- Students who reported involvement in truancy between Years 9 to 11 were more likely to be associated with trouble-oriented peer groups; 17 percent of this group report 'frequent-very frequent' truancy compared with 5 percent of those who were more likely to be attached to success-oriented peers.

- A significant relationship is also evident from the official data, but the differences are more noticeable for the two higher levels of offically recorded involvement in truancy (i.e. 27% of students with trouble-oriented friends compared with 17% of those with success-oriented friends).

In the wave 3 longitudinal study questionnaire, respondents reported a wide range of activities that they usually engaged in while truanting. Fifty-one percent of them indicated that they engaged in activities with others (e.g. 'visiting friends', 'walking the streets'). Some truanting activities, however, appear to be less peer group related. Solitary activities such as 'homework', 'helping at home' and 'appointments' were also reported by panel members and might be considered by school authorities to be acceptable reasons for non-attendance.

TABLE 4.13

Maximum Frequency Self-Reported (Years 9-11) and Official (Years 7-11) Truancy by Peer Group Attachment at Wave 3 (1983)

(by percentage of respondents)

	Success-Oriented Friends	Trouble-Oriented Friends
Maximum Frequency Self-Reported:	(N=921)	(N=852)
Never	54	27
Very Little	31	37
Little	10	19
Frequent	3	9
Very frequent	2	8
TOTAL	100	100
Chi-square (4) = 166.79, p<.001		
Maximum Frequency Official:	(N=884)	(N=756)
Never	3	1
Very Little	24	20
Little	56	52
Frequent	10	14
Very frequent	7	13
TOTAL	100	100
Chi-square (4) = 28.90, p<.001		

These data concerning the diversity of activities engaged in by truants are illuminated by the findings of the case studies which suggest that, in general, truants report 'staying at home', 'going out with friends' and 'shopping'. The report Student Perspectives on Truancy details a diverse range of places outside the home that truants spend their time in, but very few of these students could be regarded as 'loitering' or involved in other troublesome behaviours. With respect to group involvement, the findings of these case studies suggest that truancy differs somewhat from juvenile delinquency.

4.6 Summary

The data of this study indicate that involvement in truancy is fairly widespread among the secondary school population. This activity varies from infrequent to frequent involvement in truant behaviour. The findings also suggest that the chronic truants group at any year level is of the order of 5 percent of the year cohort.

As was observed from the longitudinal data (and supported by the case study findings) involvement in truancy increases from Year 7 to Year 10 and peak involvement appears to coincide with the end of compulsory schooling (Years 9 and 10). In addition, official school data indicate that the proportion of students engaging in truant behaviour peaks within each year at term three.

While truancy is widespread, nonetheless, it appears to be primarily episodic. Using both self-report and official data to examine the notion of persistence of non-attendance, it was found that students who engage in varying degrees of truancy tend to do so only for a limited period of time. Even at the more extreme frequencies of truancy, students generally reform their behaviour if they remain at school.

Findings of the case studies identify several reasons for truancy such as 'catching up with homework and schoolwork', 'dislike of particular subjects or teachers' and 'a day off from school'. Reasons of this kind are likely to occur at particular times during schooling and, therefore, may offer some explanation for why some students move into and out of truant behaviour. For some students, however, truant behaviour is a response to their lack of academic success and consequent lowered status in school. From this perspective, reasons such as those identified through the case studies may describe the surface features of truancy rather than the underlying causes of the behaviour.

A range of antecedents of truancy was examined in this chapter. Features of students' family backgrounds and schools attended were cross-tabulated with truancy to provide an indication of their relationship with truant behaviour. Following the theoretical framework of this study, analysis was then directed toward examining the relationship between truancy and several students' perspectives about their placement in the success flow of the of schools and their attitudes to school and teachers. Finally, the extent of truancy among students who were differentially attached to success-oriented or trouble-oriented peer groups was reported.

Support for relationships between the two family characteristics (socioeconomic status and parental educational expectations) and truant behaviour was not found across both measures of truancy. The case studies also call into question whether truancy is related to features of students' family backgrounds.

Of relevance were the bivariate relationships between the structural characteristics of schools attended by the panel as Year 9 students in 1980 and engagement in truancy. Two characteristics of particular interest were the affiliation of schools (i.e. government, independent and catholic) and the practices and procedures adopted by schools to monitor and respond to truancy. With respect to school affiliation, nongovernment schools tended to have a lower proportion of students regarded as exhibiting frequent involvement in truancy at some time during schooling. This finding may be partly due to family background characteristics of students attending these schools. Further, higher rates of truancy were identified in those schools which implemented intensive practices to enforce school attendance. It is significant to note from the case studies that some students, particularly those in the compulsory years of secondary school, may be unaware of the rules and procedures which govern school responses to truancy. Also, several case studies suggest that, from the point of view of students, punishments for truancy do not act always as a deterrent.

Students' placements within school success flows, as measured by their present status (i.e. perception of their own educational achievement compared with that of their student peers), appears to play an important role in understanding truant behaviour. Truancy was found to be more prevalent among the student subpopulation which regarded itself as having a lower level of present status with the school. These findings, according to theoretical formulations about the extent to which students are committed to the conventional order of the school, provide evidence that truancy is more likely to occur among the student group which is not well placed in the success flows of schools. While it is recognised that some successful students need not be committed to school, this assertion is supported by analyses, of data on attitudes to school and attitudes to teachers. Those students who hold negative attitudes to school, schooling and/or teachers are more likely to engage in truancy compared with their peers who appear more committed to schooling. Case study data illuminate some of the social psychological aspects operating within schools by repeatedly referring to problems with subjects, and relationships with teachers, as significant determinants of truant behaviour.

The final institutional arena addressed in this chapter was the influence of peer group attachment on truancy. In line with the literature, students who had engaged in truancy were more likely to associate with peers who they regarded as not academically successful, in trouble, truants and/or early school leavers. Such peer groups, which are not part of the school's success flow, may provide reinforcement for involvement in troublesome behaviours such as truancy. The relative importance of the peer group, as well as the importance of school and family background features, is explored in Chapter 6 where the theoretical model of truancy is examined by path analyses.

CHAPTER 5

CONSEQUENCES OF TRUANCY : DELINQUENCY AND POST-COMPULSORY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

The previous chapter indicated the central role of the school in the promotion of truant behaviour, both in an active and passive sense; structural conditions within the school define successful and unsuccessful students. Academically unsuccessful students are less likely to be committed to the purpose and values of school and schooling. It is these students who are more susceptible to peer group pressures associated with troublesome behaviours.

Truancy, as a form of trouble, has been argued to have both short-term and long-term consequences. These consequences are not restricted to truants, but may be generally applicable to those students who are locked out of the school's success flow. It would appear that such youth, - besides perhaps having a greater propensity toward truancy, internalise the status implicitly and explicitly ascribed to them by the labelling processes of the school. This internalisation can engender feelings of failure, worthlessness and inferiority and in turn, these features of psychological alienation may be transferred into expectations that affect the longer-term aspirations and outcomes for individuals (i.e. the self-fulfilling prophecy). As Pink (1982) states, in summarising the views of Silberman (1970) about the effect of academic failure:

> '...the schools' failure to improve the academic performance of students seriously handicaps such students both in coping (and learning) in the short-term and perhaps more damagingly in the long-term where the "credential society" equates ability and status with schooling success.'
>
> (Pink, 1982:148)

If failure in school has such a pervasive influence on young people, in terms of contributing to troublesome behaviours (such as juvenile delinquency) and lowered educational/employment outcome, a question for this report becomes 'Does truant behaviour contribute further to school failure?' A further question is, 'To what extent is failure a sufficient pre-condition for these critical and negative consequences for students?'.

To begin to address these questions the available research data concerning juvenile delinquency and the educational/employment activities of young people in the years of post-compulsory schooling have been examined. Given that truancy for many students is of an episodic nature, the following sections address the question of whether it is a short-term behaviour with longer-term consequences.

5.1 The Effects of Truancy on Juvenile Delinquency

While previous research has reported a linkage between truancy and juvenile delinquency, the nature of this relationship is unclear. Some researchers (e.g. Tyerman, 1968) have argued that truancy is a cause of more serious law violations, whereas others (e.g. Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977) view these behaviours as independent phenomena that have certain common causal factors, particularly those related to schools and schooling.

The longitudinal data of this study included information from Victorian police records. Of the original panel members (N = 2378), 8 percent were found to have been in official contact with police for delinquent offences by August, 1983. The majority of this delinquent group were 'one-time' offenders as 64 percent had only one police contact while 20 percent had more than two contacts (see Table 5.1).

TABLE 5.1

Frequency of Police Contacts for Delinquent Group

	N	Percent
Number of Contacts:		
1	122	64
2	30	16
3-5	24	12
6-10	11	6
More than 10	3	2
TOTAL	190	100

It should be noted, however, that about one half of the delinquent group (52%) were recorded by police as having had multiple offences (see Table 5.2).

TABLE 5.2

Frequency of Police-Recorded Offences for Delinquent Group

	N	Percent
Number of Offences:		
1	90	48
2-3	46	24
4-8	27	14
9-12	9	5
More than 12	18	9
TOTAL	190	100

Overall, 554 offences were committed by the group. These were predominantly property crimes (66%) and were mainly of a relatively less serious nature (e.g. theft from shops). By comparison, 7 percent of police charges were for violent crimes, almost all of these being assault.

Table 5.3 provides data which indicate the distribution of different types of offenders within the delinquent group.

TABLE 5.3

Distribution of Offence Type for Delinquent Group

	N	Percent
Type of Offences:		
Property	105	55
Moral	31	16
Violent	3	2
Property-Moral	30	16
Property-Violent	3	2
Moral-Violent	0	0
Property-Moral-Violent	18	9
TOTAL	190	100

An examination of these data reveals that the majority of offenders committed relatively minor offences. That is, 87 percent of the group were either property offenders, moral/social order offenders or a combination of these offence types. (Offences against moral and social order include indecent language, violations of motor and traffic regulations, and trespassing.) Of the delinquents, 13 percent had some record of violent offences and police charges in this regard were for various forms of assault.

What is the relationship between truancy and juvenile deliquency? The data in Table 5.4 provide an indication of this relationship.

TABLE 5.4

Delinquency Status by Maximum Self-Reported and Official Truancy
(percentage of respondents)

	MAXIMUM FREQUENCY OF TRUANCY				
	Never	Very Little	Little	Frequent	Very Frequent
A. Self-Reported Truancy	(N=749)	(N=611)	(N=259)	(N=105)	(N=83)
Deliquency status:					
Delinquent	3	7	8	13	25
Non-delinquent	97	93	92	87	75
Chi-square (4) = 69.99, p<.001					
B. Official Truancy	(N=61)	(N=447)	(N=1078)	(N=233)	(N=232)
Deliquency status:					
Delinquent	6	4	7	7	11
Non-delinquent	94	96	93	93	89
Chi-square (4) = 11.54, N.S.					

From the table, the self-report measure of truant behaviour provides some evidence about the likelihood of engaging in law violations. As the incidence of truancy at some time in Years 9 to 11 increases, the likelihood of students acquiring a delinquency record also increases; 3 percent of students who reported no involvement in truancy were juvenile delinquents, whereas 25 percent of the 'very frequent' truancy group had been charged by the police for juvenile offences. In contrast, official truancy records indicate a slight but non-significant increase in the proportion of students who were delinquent across the various levels of recorded involvement in truancy. Of interest is the difference between the patterns for both measures of truancy. The self-report data appear more likely to identify 'frequent' and 'very frequent' truants as juvenile delinquents than do the official school records.

An additional aspect which may be considered about the relationship between these two troublesome behaviours concerns on the one hand, the level of truancy prior to delinquency and, on the other, the level of truancy after delinquency. A summary of the truant behaviours of the delinquent group prior to and after their first offence is given in Table 5.5. Before discussing this aspect it needs to be recognised that delinquents are not young people who exclusively engage in frequent or very frequent truant behaviours. As shown in Table 5.5, the majority of juvenile delinquents have no history of frequent or very frequent truancy (e.g. 69% reported less than frequent truancy prior to their first offence and 71% were classified as less than frequent by official school records after their first offence.) This finding suggests some modification of the findings which may be drawn from Table 5.4. It needs to be recognised however, that besides missing data, the size of the delinquent group identified by both truancy measures has reduced some delinquent offences occurring prior to the time period during which truancy estimates were derived.

The general frequency patterns of truancy, both before and after delinquency, are different for both the self-report and official measures. The self-report data suggest that, following the first delinquency offence, there is some degree of reform by those who reported that they had engaged in high levels of truant behaviour (i.e. 31% of delinquents were frequent or very frequent truants before their first offence whereas the proportion dropped to 21% after the first offence. The official data, however, suggests that such reform did not occur (i.e. comparable figures were 19% and 29%).

TABLE 5.5

Maximum Self-reported and Official Truancy Before and After Delinquents' First Offence

(by percentage of respondents)

	Pre-Delinquency	After Delinquency
A. Self-reported Truancy in Years 9-11:	(N=87)	(N=74)
Never	25	19
Very Little	29	42
Little	15	19
Frequent	13	11
Very Frequent	18	10
TOTAL	100	100
B. Official Truancy in Years 7-11:	(N=141)	(N=100)
Never	16	18
Very Little	21	13
Little	45	40
Frequent	10	10
Very Frequent	9	19
TOTAL	100	100

Using these cohort data to discuss change can be misleading as the cohorts are not identical. What is necessary in order to examine whether reform has taken place are data for the same individuals before and after delinquency. When such data were examined for each measure no significant difference was found.[1] That is to say, there was no significant change in the school non-attendance behaviours before and after the first occurrence of the juvenile offence. Based on these data, therefore, some modification of discussions about labelling theory seem required. The works of Cicourel (1968) and Polk _et al_. (1981) suggest that as the intensity of negative labelling increases, the probability of reform decreases. It appears from the longitudinal data concerning truancy and juvenile delinquency that labelling practices of schools and the criminal justice system have no bearing on one another. Acquiring a school label as a truant does not predispose young people to engage in other troublesome behaviour. The predisposition for juvenile delinquency appears related to antecedent conditions similar to those of truancy (Wilson and Braithwaite, 1977). On the other hand, the data in this chapter suggest that acquiring a delinquent label has little or no effect on persistence or reform of truant behaviour.

In summary, while there appears to be a slight relationship between truancy and juvenile delinquency, as Wilson and Braithwaite (1977) suggest, this relationship is not causal but rather it arises because of the association between both behaviours and particular antecedents. Some supporting evidence for this assertion has been drawn from 1983 Community Policing Squads records.[2] These data indicate that there were 527 offenders aged 10 to 14 years known to police, who had commited an offence while truanting (i.e. during school hours). Using census data to estimate the size of the 10-14 year old Victorian school age cohort and adjusting by using this study's estimate of the extent of Year 7 official truant behaviour, it may be inferred that truant offenders known to the Community Policing Squads comprise something in the order of one-half of

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1. A McNemar test for the significance of changes was applied to the data from both measures and the results were not significant at the $p<.05$ level.
2. Unpublished data by courtesy of the Victoria Police Force.

one percent of the truanting cohort. These squads usually handle the greatest proportion of child offenders (approximately 40% of offenders) handled by police. Allowing for offenders detected by other units of the Victorian Police Force, the proportion of students who are both recorded by schools as having at least one unexplained absence and known to police for delinquent offences increases to about one and one-half percent. It must be recognised that delinquency, like truancy, contains an undetected group (i.e. 'hidden' offenders) and that this simple estimation procedure is restricted to officially recorded juvenile delinquents. Nevertheless, it would appear that conclusions that truancy causes delinquency, or that a sizeable proportion of truants commit offences during school hours, are questionable.

5.2 The Effects of Truancy on the Years of Post-Compulsory Schooling

Another feature of schooling experiences is concerned with the future status of young people. Boudon (1975) and Rosenbaum (1976), among others, support the notion that future success is likely for those who are placed in the success flow of the school; that is: 'the presumption of future success is recognised as conditional upon continued success' (Polk et al., 1981:73). However, the question remains whether truant behaviour, as a manifestation of being out of the schools' success flow, presents a barrier to re-entering (or regaining placement within) that flow. Drawing from the works of Gray et al., (1980), Farrington (1980) and Willis (1977), it appears that truants (at least chronic truants) may suffer the same fate as early school leavers; failure to acquire educational credentials increases the likelihood that such students will move into low status occupations. One avenue available to investigate this which is possible through the longitudinal study, is to examine the post-compulsory educational and employment activities of panel members. The relevant data, derived from a cross-tabulation of Profile at wave 3 (see Chapter 2) by maximum frequency of truancy, are reported in Tables 5.6 and 5.7.

Several observations can be made from these tables. First, from Table 5.6 it appears that there is a general inverse relationship between maximum frequency of self-reported truant behaviour and the likelihood of remaining in post-compulsory education (Chi-square (4) = 43.86, $p<.001$). Three-quarters of the students who reported that they had never truanted during Years 9 to 11 (74%) remained in education in 1983 (i.e. generally Year 12), compared with slightly less than half of the group (46%) who had at some stage in the previous three years reported 'very frequent' involvement in truancy.

TABLE 5.6

Labour Market and Educational Activities of the Panel at Wave 3 (March, 1983) by Maximum Frequency of Self-Reported Truancy for Years 9-11

(percentage of respondents)

	MAXIMUM FREQUENCY OF TRUANCY				
	Never (N=762)	Very Little (N=610)	Little (N=254)	Frequent (N=103)	Very Frequent (N=79)
Profile at Wave 3:					
Attending Educational Institutions					
Employed full-time	7	7	6	6	6
Employed part-time	15	17	15	16	8
Not employed	52	46	41	35	32
Not Attending Educational Institutions					
Employed full-time	14	16	21	20	22
Employed part-time	4	2	5	3	6
Not employed	8	12	12	20	27
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

Conversely, the relative proportions of young people 'not attending educational institutions' in 1983 increase as maximum frequency of self-reported truancy increases. For example, of the group who reported no truancy during Years 9 to 11, 26 percent were found to be not in education whereas, 55 percent of those who had reported 'Very Frequent' involvement were not attending educational institutions in 1983. It should be noted that the 'Not employed' category in Tables 5.6 and 5.7 includes those who were not employed and actively seeking work i.e. those who are the subject of generally used unemployment statistics and those who are not employed and not actively seeking work i.e. those who are classified as non-participants in the labour force).

Further analysis of the self-report truancy data indicated that 11 percent of students who reported that they had not truanted in Year 10 compared with 55 percent of students who reported that they were 'Very Frequent' truants in Year 10 had left school by Year 11. However, students who reported very frequent truancy at some time during Years 9 to 11 did not constitute the majority of panel members who were early school leavers (12% of the panel). That is, high levels of involvement in truancy are not a sufficient explanation of withdrawal from school.

The data concerning the educational and employment activities and official truancy of the panel are reported in Table 5.7. An examination of the proportions of the different students groups (who were recorded as having varying involvement in truant behaviour) indicates that there is some tentative support for the patterns noted from the analysis of self-reported truancy data. (There was a significant difference in patterns of truancy between panel members in education and not in education: Chi-square (4) = 15.53, $p<.005$.)

Due to the large sample size it was possible to examine whether attitudes toward school intervene in the relationship between truant behaviour and later educational/employment activities. The analysis of the self-report data identified an interactive effect. It seems that the relationship between truancy and differences in educational/employment activities required elaboration because of the differential effects of positive and negative attitudes toward school and schooling.

TABLE 5.7

Labour Market and Educational Activities of the Panel at Wave 3 (March, 1983) by Maximum Frequency of Official Truancy for Years 7-11

(percentage of respondents)

	MAXIMUM FREQUENCY OF TRUANCY				
	Never (N=762)	Very Little (N=610)	Little (N=254)	Frequent (N=103)	Very Frequent (N=79)
Profile at Wave 3:					
Attending Educational Institutions					
Employed full-time	6	6	6	5	5
Employed part-time	18	18	16	9	15
Not employed	48	49	49	44	46
Not Attending Educational Institutions					
Employed full-time	19	14	16	22	12
Employed part-time	4	3	2	6	4
Not employed	5	10	10	14	18
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

Among students who had negative attitudes toward school, the relationships reported above (i.e. higher truancy associated with lower educational participation) persist. For this group, high involvement in truant behaviour has a significant direct effect (at $p<.005$) on subsequent educational/employment participation independent of negative school attitudes. On the other hand, among students who had positive attitudes toward school, the first order relationship was not significant (at $p<.05$ level), indicating that positive school attitudes intervene in the relationship between truancy and subsequent activities. In other words, differences in educational/employment activities among truants appear to be affected by whether or not truants hold positive attitudes toward school.

Another relationship which may be examined concerns truancy and the likelihood of attaining a secondary school credential to facilitate successful movement into high status educational and occupational careers. One source of data available in this study to address this issue is the 1983 Victorian Higher School Certificate (HSC) results for the panel members (i.e. 28% of the original Year 9 panel).

First, it is possible to determine whether there is a difference in the extent of participation in HSC for truants and non-truants. Self-report data and official attendance records demonstrate similar trends in that students who had a history of 'never' or 'very little' truanting were significantly more likely ($p<.005$) to undertake HSC (40% for self-report and 35% for official data), than students who were 'frequent' or 'very frequent' truants (15% for self-report and 23% for official data).[3]

Second, the success rate of students at HSC was examined with respect to both measures of truancy. While for the 'never' and 'very little' categories of self-reported truancy, 77 percent of these students satisfactorily completed HSC, only 46 percent of the 'frequent - very frequent' were successful. Using official truancy data, the corresponding figures were 76 percent and 67 percent. These findings suggest that the sharper distinctions available from self-report data may reflect that the self-report measure, while identifying various levels of school non-attendance, may also be gauging other aspects of the complex phenomenon of truancy, such as commitment to school. The official school records on the other hand, offer only an organisational label of truancy or non-attendance and, therefore, are less likely to capture the significance of the interactions between organisational labels and the individual student. As has been repeatedly noted throughout Chapter 4 and in this chapter, measures of truancy taken from students and taken from school records do not always provide the same picture of the truancy phenomenon. Nevertheless, the two perspectives provide points of view which are more often convergent than divergent.

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[3] Corresponding data for delinquents revealed that 10 percent of this group attempted HSC in 1983.

5.3 Summary

The data and discussion presented in this chapter support the view that truancy may be, for the most part, a response to school-related factors. For some, this response appears to carry with it certain longer term consequences but it should be recognised that this group comprises only a small proportion of the total student (and youth) population. Those young people who have had some history of engaging in frequent or chronic truancy were over-represented in official delinquency records and in the early school-leaver population. It needs to be recalled, however, that students who have not had a history of frequent or chronic truancy are also to be found in the lists of early school leavers and official delinquency records.

An understanding of truancy and its consequences should be grounded in an analysis of the major structural supports for the commitment of young people to their educational experiences. These supports, including family, school and peers, should be viewed as a sequential process of events which reduces bonding to conventional behaviour, whereby some young people are more vulnerable and consequently more likely to engage in troublesome behaviours during secondary school.

CHAPTER 6

EXAMINING AN EXPLANATORY MODEL OF TRUANCY

The literature and data presented so far have supported a multifactor view of truant behaviour in secondary schools: the 'causes' of truancy constitute a complex set of factors involving individual, family, peer group and school characteristics. This complexity makes it difficult to isolate the direct contribution of each factor to the incidence of truant behaviour occurring within the student population, although key features of schools and schooling appear to play central roles in causal explanations about truancy and the consequences of truant behaviour (in terms of juvenile delinquency and educational/employment activities of young people in the post-compulsory education years).

This chapter examines the relative influence of each factor (i.e. family background, school, peer group and student variables) in terms of both direct and indirect effects on truancy. Estimates of these effects have been derived from a path analysis technique which examines the theoretical ordering of the major institutional blocks which constitute the truancy model (see Chapter 3). This technique enables the relative contributions of each variable to be identified while controlling all other theoretically defined 'causal' factors. Standardised regression coefficients provide measures of these relative influences.[1]

In the following sections only significant direct paths (at $p<.01$) between variables have been discussed.[2] Where R^2 values are reported, these

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1. As most of the variables in the model are measured by indices a list-wise deletion of cases with missing data was used for predicting the coefficients of the structural equations for the model. Because a list-wise technique was used for the estimation of path coefficients, the total number of cases reduces as the analysis proceeds through each stage. There were 1278 students for whom complete data on all 13 variables were available.

2. As Ross (1976) has shown, design effect will vary for correlation and path coefficients when schools are used as the primary sampling units. Accordingly, the rounded adjustment factors provided by Ross (1976:43) were used when determining the significance of these coefficients.

were for structural equations which included only independent variables which had significant direct relationships with the dependent variable. Consequently, these values may be slight underestimates of the contribution of the variables in the model if all links were considered through the successive stages.

The first set of data relevant to the truancy model relate to the inter-relationships between the variables included in the model (see Table 6.1). As the data reported for these 13 variables refer to bivariate correlations, the number of cases for each correlation varies but in general the correlations are based on about 90 percent of the original panel. The intercorrelation matrix indicates that the two family background characteristics, two school structural features, and the three measures of students' commitment to school were negatively related to one or both measures of truancy. Peer group attachment (a negatively oriented measure in terms of its association with forms of adolescent 'trouble') was positively related to both self-reported and official truancy. School size, another structural feature of schools, was not significantly related to truancy but appears to be highly related to school action, a measure of the practices used by schools to monitor and respond to truant behaviour. As might be expected, school action was positively related to both truancy measures. Juvenile delinquency was found to be related to all variables (apart from family socioeconomic status and school size) and, in particular, had strong positive associations with peer group attachment and self-reported truancy.

TABLE 6.1

Bivariate Correlation Matrix

	VARIABLES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Family Socioeconomic Status	-												
2	Parental Educational Expectations	0.16	-											
3	School Socioeconomic Level	0.45	0.16	-										
4	School Climate	0.22	0.36	0.50	-									
5	School Success	0.11	0.20	0.02*	0.03*	-								
6	Occupational Aspirations	0.15	0.38	0.19	0.28	0.23	-							
7	School Importance	0.12	0.29	0.06	0.19	0.31	0.28	-						
8	Peer Group Attachment	-0.14	-0.26	-0.13	-0.29	-0.16	-0.21	-0.34	-					
9	School Size	-0.14	0.08	-0.03*	-0.20	-0.01*	-0.05*	-0.05	-0.05*	-				
10	School Action	-0.18	-0.12	-0.40	-0.30	-0.03*	-0.09	-0.04*	0.11	0.60	-			
11	Self-Report Truancy	-0.09	-0.09	-0.12	-0.15	-0.13	-0.07	-0.25	0.39	0.04*	0.15	-		
12	Official Truancy	-0.05	-0.04*	-0.15	-0.09	-0.11	-0.02*	-0.11	0.15	0.03*	0.21	0.25	-	
13	Juvenile Delinquency	-0.03*	-0.09	-0.06	-0.12	-0.06	-0.07	-0.12	0.22	0.04*	0.07	0.19	0.08	-

* Nonsignificant at p<.01

6.1 Longitudinal Data and the Truancy Model

Table 6.2 provides the standardised regression coefficients of all significant variables included in the reduced structural equations referring to successive stages of the truancy model. (See Table 6.3 for standardised regression coefficients of all variables. From these data, it should be observed that many of these equations contain variables which provide negligible contributions to the total amount of variance explained for each dependent variable examined. Further, there was fluctuation in the relative strength of the variables in accounting for variation in the successive components of the model.)

Given that the academic success and, therefore, the status of students in schools have been repeatedly shown to be linked to family background factors (i.e. status origins), it is appropriate to begin analysis by focussing on the family. The two measures of family background used in this study were socioeconomic status (SES) and perceived parental expectations for the educational attainment of panel members. The relationships between the family and four structural features of the schools at which male and female members of the panel were in attendance as Year 9 students in 1980 are shown in Figure 6.1.

TABLE 6.2

Standardised Regression Coefficients of Reduced Structural Equations With Model Variables as the Dependent Variable

		Dependent Variables										
		2	3	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Independent Variables:												
1	Socioeconomic Status	.160	.437	-	-	.090	-	.076	-	-	-	-
2	Parental Educational Expectations		.094	.277	-	.218	.283	.127	-.207	-	-	-
3	School Socioeconomic Level			.447	-.384	-	-	-.085	-	-	-	-
4	School Size			-.160	.593	-	-	-	-	-	-.162	-
5	School Climate				-	-	.165	.136	-.172	-	-	-
6	School Action					.095	-	-	-	.086	.271	-
7	School Success						.160	.246	-	-	-	-
8	Occupational Aspirations							.138	-	-	-.091	-
9	School Importance								-.276	-.154	-	-
10	Peer Group Attachment									.324	.111	.241(a)
11	Self-Reported Truancy											.162(b)
12	Official Truancy											.121
13	Juvenile Delinquency											-
	R^2	.026	.213	.353	.509	.063	.190	.183	.155	.173	.077	.046(b) .056(a)

TABLE 6.3

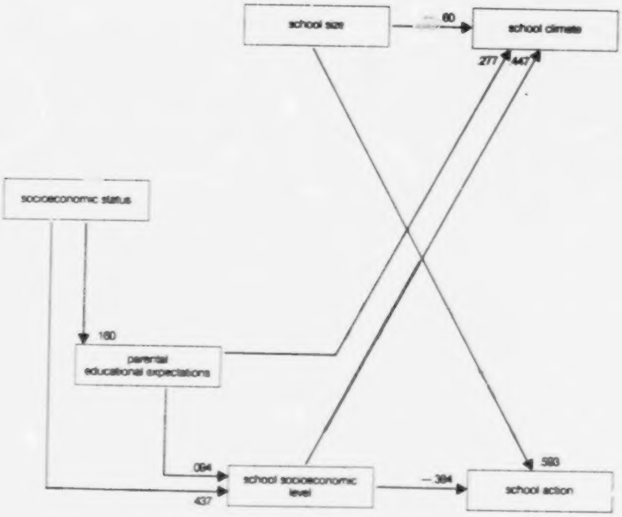
Standardised Regression Coefficients of Structural Equations With Model Variables as the Dependent Variable

		Dependent Variables										
		2	3	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Independent Variables:												
1	Socioeconomic Status	.160	.437	-.028*	.002*	.103	.034*	.076	-.080*	.012*	.049*	.006*
2	Parental Educational Expectations		.094	.279	-.007*	.232	.283	.127	-.121	.046*	.020*	-.051*
3	School Socioeconomic Level			.460	-.390	-.006*	.040*	-.084	.091	-.040*	-.107	-.027*
4	School Size			-.159	.595	-.026*	.002*	-.007*	-.044*	-.064*	-.140	-.015*
5	School Climate				.011*	-.047*	.139	.134	-.204	.009*	.054*	-.043*
6	School Action					.097	.014*	.000*	.084*	.125	.242	.031*
7	School Success						.156	.247	-.047*	-.030*	-.070*	-.011*
8	Occupational Aspirations							.138	-.032*	.026*	.035*	-.017*
9	School Importance								-.230	-.159	-.093	.021*
10	Peer Group Attachment									.335	.133	.135
11	Self-Reported Truancy											.124
12	Official Truancy											-.022*
13	Juvenile Delinquency											
	R^2	.026	.213	.352	.508	.062	.190	.180	.183	.174	.081	.057

*Not significant at p<.01

FIGURE 6.1

The Relationships Between Family Background and the Characteristics of Schools Attended in 1980

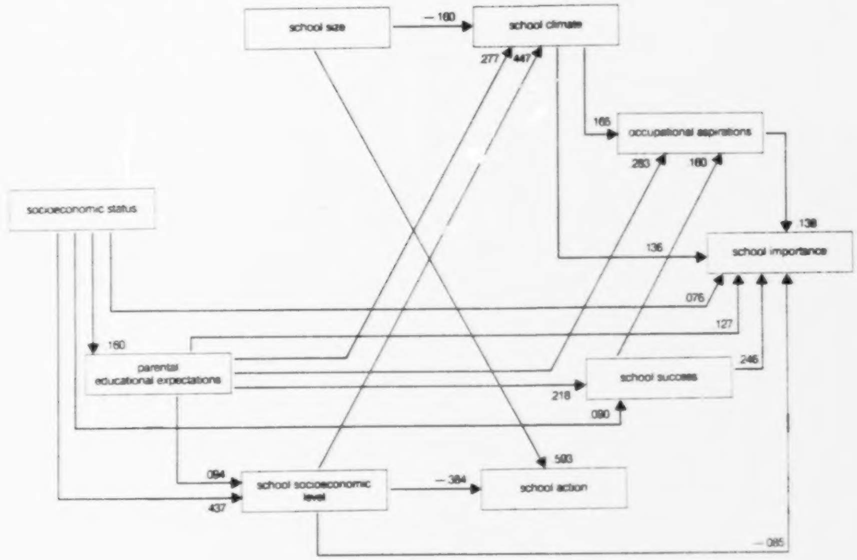


As each individual student's SES value contributes to the mean socioeconomic level of the school (SSEL) attended, it is not suprising that SES strongly determines the SSEL (Beta = 0.437). There was no direct significant path from SES to school climate, a composite measure of the student population's attitudes to school, attitudes to teachers and occupational aspirations. The major indirect contribution of SES to school climate is via SSEL. Parents' educational expectations, on the other hand, were directly related to SSEL to a lesser extent (Beta = 0.094) than SES and its direct contribution to school climate was greater than the indirect contribution of SES to school climate. A strong relationship between SSEL and school climate should be noted (Beta = 0.447).

The variable school size was introduced at this stage into the model and no attempt was made to examine its relationship with the two family background measures. Both school size (Beta = 0.593) and SSEL (Beta = 0.384) appear to be directly linked to school action (i.e. school procedures for monitoring and responding to non-attendance). It is interesting to note that schools of a relatively lower socioeconomic level appear to have more intensive levels of school action. Further, relatively smaller schools tend to have less intensive school action procedures. Finally, Figure 6.1 indicates that there are few direct relationships between the two family background characteristics and the four structural characteristics of schools considered in this study.

FIGURE 6.2

The Relationships Between Family Background, School Characteristics and Student Commitment to Schooling



As shown in Figure 6.2, the paths of influence of the family and school factors on three measures of school commitment are complex. Two of these measures, as previously discussed, refer to two dimensions of students' placements within the success flow of schools (i.e. school success and occupational aspirations). The third, school importance, is an index of the panel's attitudes toward school and schooling when they were Year 9 students.

The two variables which have a direct path of influence to school success are the two family background variables, with parental educational expectations having the stronger direct path (Beta = 0.218). These data should not be interpreted as providing contrary evidence to the findings of researchers who have shown that success in school is largely dependent upon structural features of schools (e.g. Polk et al. 1981; Pink, 1982). The variable used in this research refers to a within-school measure of students' perceptions of their school success relative to their peers within the school. On the other hand, the school structural characteristics are based on between-school measures, and, therefore there is no reason for these variables to be related to this measure of school success as shown in Table 6.1.[3] School success has been included because of its theoretical and empirical importance to the other two measures of school commitment, although it is recognised that a comprehensive measure of academic success applicable across schools may have been more appropriate. The other two school commitment measures are not subject to this problem (see Chapter 2).

Within the path diagram the independent influences of parental educational expectations (Beta = 0.283), school success (Beta = 0.160) and school climate (Beta = 0.165) on occupational aspirations contribute to a relatively high multiple correlation ($R = 0.44$, $R^2 = 0.19$). It would appear that the effect of SES on the occupational aspirations of students is mediated through school success and parental educational expectations.

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3. Accordingly, although a significant path was found between school action and school success (Beta = 0.095), this path is not represented in Figure 6.2.

SES did have a direct path of influence to school importance, but the strength of this relationship (Beta = 0.076) was less than the direct contributions of the other family background characteristic (parental educational expectations, Beta = 0.127), the two structural features of schools (school climate, Beta = 0.136; SSEL, Beta = 0.085) and the other two features of school commitment (school success, Beta = 0.246; occupational aspirations, Beta = 0.138). These relationships lie in the expected theoretical directions (see Chapters 3 and 4) apart from the negative relationship between SSEL and school importance (Beta = -0.085). However, the products of the Beta weights assigned to the indirect contributions of SSEL to school importance are positive and in an additive sense counterbalance the direct path from SSEL; school importance appears not to be influenced by the particular SSEL. This finding was confirmed by the fact that the inclusion of SSEL had only negligible effect in terms of contributing to the variance explained for this dependent variable.

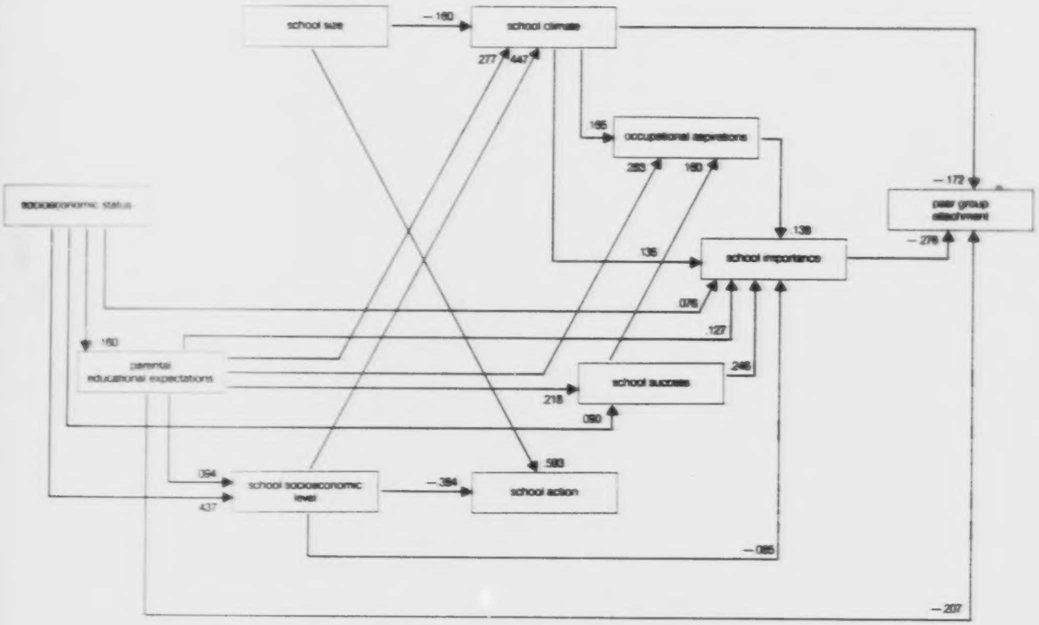
At this stage it is appropriate to reflect upon the theoretical framework for the truancy model. School importance has been argued to be a social psychological factor linked to the commitment of students to secondary schooling. Data analyses presented to date suggest that this commitment is influenced by structural characteristics of both the family and school arenas. However, the influences of student perceptions concerning academic success and their aspirations for future employment seem to be more important. These additional social psychological factors provide some indication of the way in which students gauge their placement within the mainstream success flows of schools. While some degree of interaction is undoubtedly present for these variables because of measurement properties, committed students may generally be described as having relatively higher status family origins, present school status and future employment aspirations.

Taking examination of the model a step further (see Figure 6.3), some support for the literature which has emphasised the link between the degree of student commitment to school and attachment to differential peer groupings is found (Petrie, 1983; Pink, 1983; Polk et al., 1981; Polk and Schafer, 1972). School importance had a negative and direct relationship with peer group attachment (Beta = -0.276), a variable in this model which refers to negatively or trouble-oriented peer groupings (see Chapter 2). The multiple correlation of this variable in association with the two family background measures and the measure of school attended in 1980 on peer group attachment was relatively high ($R = 0.39$, $R^2 = 0.16$). The standardised regression coefficients for the direct paths of influence to peer group attachment were parents' educational expectations, Beta = -0.207, school climate, Beta = -0.172; school importance, Beta = -0.276.

From the diagram it may be observed that two other structural features of schools (i.e. SSEL and school size) and the other two dimensions of school commitment (i.e. school success and occupational aspirations) have some indirect influence on peer group attachment, mainly directed through the variable school importance. These data suggest that student attachment to negatively oriented peer groupings is a function of lower parental educational expectations (indicative of lower status origins), lower school status (both in a present and future sense) and having negative attitudes toward school and schooling, as well as (to a lesser extent) the characteristics of the school attended. But recall that the peer group variable was derived from 1983 data, whereas the antecedent variables in these structural equations refer to 1980 data. If the measure of peer group attachment had been taken at the same time as the other variables, stronger paths of influence might have been found. Nevertheless, these data indicate that the effects of the antecedent variables persisted from 1980 to 1983.

Figure 6.3

The Relationships Between Family Background, School Characteristics, Student Commitment to Schooling and Peer Group Attachment



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Given that the focus of this study was troublesome behaviours, a key question is, 'How are these antecedent variables linked to one another to influence involvement in truancy and/or juvenile delinquency?'. Figure 6.4 presents the complete set of significant paths found for the model of truancy.

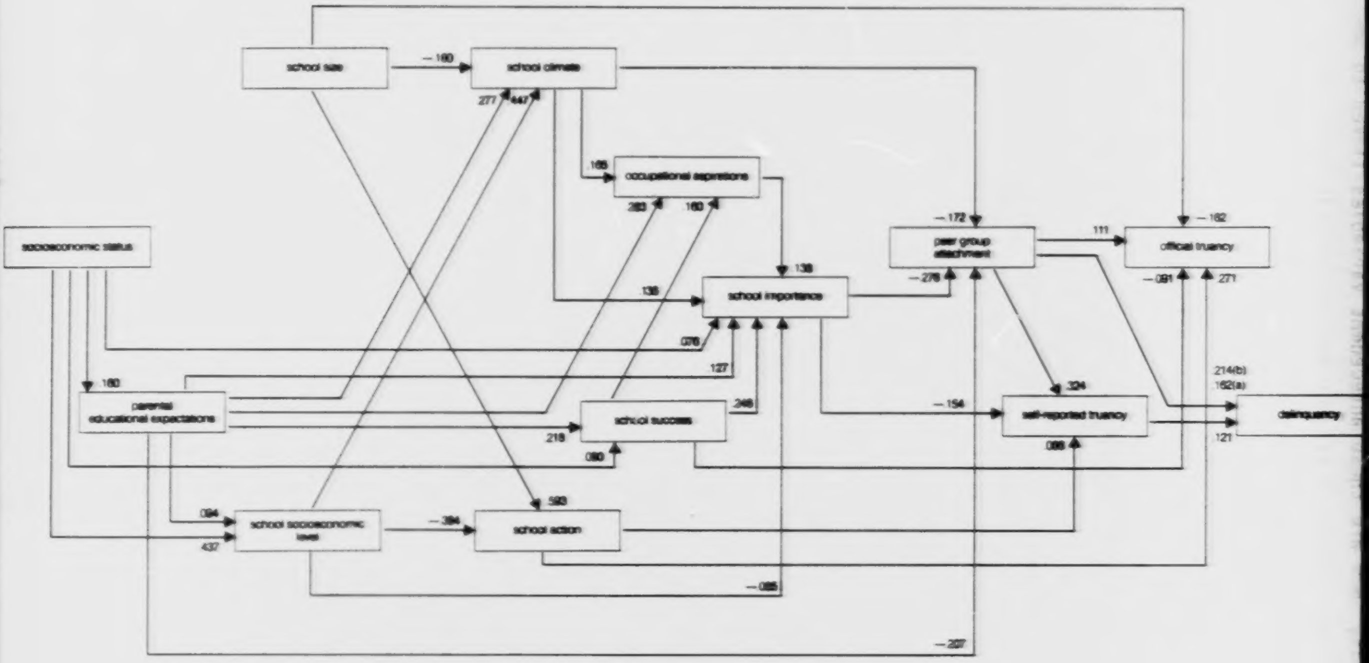
Looking first at self-reported truancy, the positive direct effect of peer group attachment, in particular, was relatively strong (Beta = 0.324); i.e. students who are attached to trouble-oriented peer groups appear to have greater involvement in self-reported truant behaviour. It is relevant to note that the effects of family background and school structural characteristics, apart from school action, on this measure of truancy were mediated through either the school importance or peer group variables; i.e. their effects were indirectly related in paths of influence to self-reported truancy.

The focal measure of school commitment, namely school importance, had both a direct and indirect influence through the peer group on the extent to which panel members reported involvement in truancy (total effect = -0.235). As illustrated in the diagram, the paths of influence on self-reported truancy of the other two measures of school commitment were mediated by school importance and/or peer group attachment. One other direct path was found between school action and self-reported truancy (Beta = 0.086) indicating that there is a greater amount of truancy in schools which implement more intensive monitoring and intervention procedures. A multiple correlation of 0.42 ($R^2 = 0.17$) was found between the variables school action, school importance and peer group attachment on self-reported truancy.

As shown in Figure 6.4, no particular ordering and thus no linkage between the two measures of truancy was specified (there is a positive relationship between these variables, r = 0.25). For official truancy, the multiple correlation based on the variables school size, school action, school success and peer group attachment obtained was 0.26 ($R^2 = 0.07$).

Figure 6.4

The Relationships Between All Characteristics and Truancy and Juvenile Delinquency



The direct influence of school size (Beta = -0.162) on official truancy was balanced by indirect paths of influence through school action (coefficient = 0.159). In other words, while larger schools tend to have more intensive school action practices and while this was positively related to the extent of officially recorded truancy, school size per se appears to have little total influence on official truancy. Compared with self-reported truancy, the direct influence of school action on official truancy (Beta = 0.271) is stronger, a finding of no surprise given that the measure of official truancy was accessed from school records.

In the case of official truancy, school success was the school commitment variable which has a direct path of influence (Beta = -0.091), whereas school importance had a direct path to self-reported truancy. This suggests that students who regard themselves as unsuccessful within the school are more likely to be officially recorded as truants. Further, the direct path of influence of peer group attachment (Beta = 0.111) to official truancy was weaker than found for self-reported truancy.

In summary, it seems that truancy, whether measured by self-report data or official data, is at least partly explained by the model proposed in this study. However, in comparing the multiple correlations it can be concluded that the predictive power of the model is greater in the case of explaining self-reported truancy. The greater explanatory power of the model for self-reported truancy compared with official truancy, while encouraging the notion that the former measure may be a more accurate reflection of actual truanting activity, may also be due to some extent to the fact that many of the variables in the model were derived from the same source (i.e. panel members). (The bivariate correlations presented in Table 6.1 indicate that stronger bivariate relationships were found between self-reported truancy and the school commitment and peer group attachment variables.)

The reduced explanatory power for official truancy is most likely due to a degree of inappropriateness of the model in being applied to officially recorded truancy (e.g. other variables not accounted for in the model may be needed), or that school attendance records used in this study may not be providing accurate measures of actual truant behaviour.

The final form of troublesome behaviour to which the model has been extended was the extent of juvenile delinquency occurring within tne longitudinal panel. In Figure 6.4 it may be noted that direct paths of influence to delinquency were found for both peer group attachment (Beta = 0.162) and self-reported truancy (Beta = 0.121). These explanatory variables yield a multiple correlation of 0.24 ($R^2 = 0.06$) with delinquency, a level consistent with findings of other studies which have investigated causal models of delinquency (e.g. Lipton and Smith, 1983).

Further, it should be observed that when official truancy is substituted for self-reporting truancy in the model there is no direct relationship between official truancy and juvenile delinquency; a finding which suggests that school attendance records do not improve an explanation for delinquent behaviour beyond that obtained from the antecedents of official truancy, which are in the main the same as those identified for self-reported truancy. (In this case the direct path of influence from peer group attachment to juvenile deliquency was Beta = 0.214.)

At this final stage of the model, the variance explained for juvenile delinquency is almost completely accounted for by the peer domain and the panel's responses concerning truancy at wave 3. What seems to be the case, in other words, is that attachment to trouble-oriented peer groups plays the central and direct role in the development of delinquent behaviour. For some young people, however, involvement in a more minor form of trouble (as reported by students) appears to be associated with juvenile delinquency but this association was not assumed to be causal (see Chapter 5).

The path analysis presented in this section provides empirical support for the truancy model proposed in Chapter 3. In moving through the causal pathways from family background to troublesome behaviours, at successive stages, it was found that the paths of influence focus on two central institutional avenues. The key variables in explanations of truant behaviour (whether measured by the school or reported by students) and to a lesser extent juvenile delinquency, are identified from this model as school importance (or school success) and peer group attachment. The status origins and school experiences of young people combine as determinants of aspects concerning the commitment of students to school and schooling. Those young people who have more tenuous bonds to the conventional purposes and functions of schools seem to drift into peer groups composed of students who are similarly less connected to the school and who engage in forms of trouble. The model of truancy explored in this study needs to be recognised as a general model given that the measures of truancy include all students who have had at least some involvement in truant behaviour during secondary schooling. It is not restricted to those students who may be regarded as chronic truants; it seeks to identify the causal relationships between a set of characteristics (including the family, school, social psychological and peer group) and any involvement in truant behaviour. It should be obvious from the data presented in this report that truancy, whether measured by official school records or student self-report, is not restricted to students who are not part of the success flow of schools. For some, truancy is not a response to negative aspects and consequences of schooling but represents a 'day-off' for what may be perceived by these young people as 'legitimate' reasons. For others, truant behaviour is a response to their schooling experiences. The model is quite powerful in this regard, identifying the significance of the students' view of the school as a substantive contributor to involvement in truant behaviour.

6.2 The Model for Males and Females

Research has commonly failed to ask whether theories of social behaviour hold similarly for males and females. However, recent Australian studies by Poole (1984), Connell et al. (1982), and Thomas (1980), among others, have argued that an understanding of the effects of schooling on young people requires separate examination for males and females. In particular, the pervasive effects of school failure may set up a different form of resistance or rejection of school by females from the one that has been assumed by major theories of social deviance, which typically have been based on data concerning male students only or undifferentiated groups of males and females. In order to investigate the applicability of the truancy model for male and female panel members, separate path analyses were conducted. While the model appears applicable to both groups, the results of these analyses demonstrate several substantive differences in explanations of truant (and delinquent) behaviour among male and female students. Although detailed path analyses are not presented here, a summary of the differences is given below. It has not been possible for this study to investigate in depth explanations of the different pathways for males and females.

For female students, no direct paths of influence were found between family socioeconomic status and the school importance and peer group attachment variables. In addition, parental educational expectations did not appear to directly influence the occupational aspirations of Year 9 females. It would seem, therefore, that for females, in comparison with their male counterparts, the influences of status origins (as measured by family background variables) on aspects of school commitment are relatively weak.

Another difference between the paths for males and females relates to the school climate variable, which attempts to distinguish between the general educational milieu of the longitudinal study schools, using students' views about teachers, the value and importance of school, and their future occupational aspirations. For female students there was no significant direct relationship between school climate and peer group attachment, whereas for male students there was no pathway from school climate to school importance. While school climate was indirectly linked to school importance through students' occupational aspirations as Year 9 students for both groups, the additional direct path of influence on school importance found in the case of females suggests that supportive school environments (in the sense of positively oriented school climates) play a more important role in the formation of positive attitudes to the nature and purposes of school among females. Further, as there was no direct relationship between family socioeconomic status and school importance for female students, the development of commitment to school for females appears to occur through different processes which are more focussed on family support for education (i.e. parental educational expectations) than social class origins.

The only direct pathway to peer group attachment for female students was from school importance, while for males four direct paths from family socioeconomic status, parental educational expectations, school climate and school importance were found. These findings suggest that, among females, association with trouble-oriented peers is mediated through their school and schooling attitudes while among males there is some persistence of the direct influences of family and school characteristics as well. It should be noted that these additional variables, in the case of males, provide greater explanatory power of peer group attachment (i.e. $R = 0.45$, $R^2 = 0.20$) than the single variable for females (i.e. $R = 0.32$, $R^2 = 0.10$).

With regard to the model and the self-reported measure of truancy for males and females, the direct paths of influence are similar apart from the absence of a pathway from school action to self-reported truancy among males (this path for females and the total group, although significant, had low Beta coefficients, 0.109 and 0.086 respectively). At this stage, variance explained by the model remains greater for males (i.e. $R = 0.45$, $R^2 = 0.20$) than for females (i.e. $R = 0.36$, $R^2 = 0.13$).

When examining the official truancy measure, the path analyses indicated that the model provides little explanation for males ($R = 0.13$, $R^2 = 0.02$), but offers some explanations for officially recorded truancy among female students ($R = 0.32$, $R^2 = 0.11$). For females, direct paths of influence were found for the socioeconomic level of the school attended (Beta = -0.174), school action (Beta = 0.154) and peer group attachment (Beta = 0.155). Consequently, the paths reported in Figure 6.4 for official truancy are primarily accounted for by the data relating to female students. Given that only 40 females were identified as juvenile deliquents it was decided not to extend the differentiated path analysis to juvenile deliquency for males and females.

6.3 Summary

In conclusion, the truancy model provides some explanation of truant behaviour for males and females, but the strength of this explanation is different for the two measures of truancy. It appears that causal explanations about truancy do differ when gender is taken into account but that a general explanation can be put forward for the entire student population.

An explanation of truant behaviour appears to be primarily based on the central role of schooling in the lives of young people and the responses of students to their experience within the years of secondary school. When truancy as a response is gauged by a self-report measure, both male and female students who are less committed to school and are attached to trouble-oriented peer groups are more likely to report involvement. According to these data, the influences of family background are mediated through the perspectives of students with respect to school and schooling and attachment to different types of peer groups.

CHAPTER 7

TOWARD NEW SCHOOL APPROACHES IN DEALING WITH TROUBLESOME BEHAVIOURS

This study has provided evidence suggesting that truant behaviour needs to be viewed as a response to the contempary school experiences of young people. Truancy, in this regard, refers to unexplained school non-attendance which is either officially recorded by school authorities or self-reported absences from school which students consider would be unacceptable to school authorities.

The findings presented in this report are applicable to the general student population who have engaged in acts of truancy at some time and as such, should not be interpreted as providing a specific and in-depth explanation of the smaller group of students who are usually referred to as chronic truants. This study did not attempt to examine chronic truants per se, but sought to examine a theoretical perspective (embracing notions about youth, schools and deviance) through the use of data concerning a representative sample of the Victorian secondary school population. The major intent of this research has been to extend our understanding of the truancy phenomenon.

It is suggested from this study that truancy, or more generally school non-attendance, is largely a behavourial manifestation of particular interactions between family, school and peer group factors which contribute to lowered student commitment to schooling and may lead to truant behaviour. From the data presented it may be argued that truancy is largely an episodic behavior and not an activity that students engage in for an extended period of time at an intense level (see Chapter 4). In addition, the causal relationships examined in Chapter 6 lend support to a view that truancy is a response influenced by the structural and/or social psychological vulnerability of students which contribute to perceptions of an unsuccessful present and future.

7.1 Current School Practices and School Non-Attendance

While Appendix 2 provides discussion of the school and other agency response networks that may be implemented in individual cases of truancy, it is relevant to consider the general Victorian school practices used to monitor and respond to school non-attendance. Data reported here were obtained from a survey of school principals/senior staff (N = 501 schools) conducted in November, 1983. Schools represented by these data were government (65%) and non-government (35%) secondary schools in Victoria.

A variety of methods are used by Victorian secondary schools to record school attendance in addition to Education Department attendance rolls. Absentee lists which specifically identify students who had unexplained absences were reported to be compiled by 41 percent of schools. Nearly half (46%) of the schools surveyed reported that attendance was monitored twice a day (i.e. morning and afternoon) and just over one-third (35%) monitored attendance every class period. It is of interest that, with regard to frequency of recording school attendance, 47 percent of government schools did so every class period, compared with 15 percent of non-government schools.

Given earlier discussion indicating methodological problems associated with school attendance records (see Chapter 2), it is pertinent to consider the decision-making procedures by which schools determine whether student absences are adequately explained. While most schools (76%) do not appear to have a written policy regarding school attendance other than regulations set out under the Education Act 1958, as a matter of course schools require written explanations for student absences (94% of schools surveyed). It should be noted tha 28 percent of schools reported that one of the criteria used to judge whether an explanation was adequate related to the school's view of the student (i.e. students regarded as trustworthy, etc.).

Most schools (71%) reported that details of inadequately and/or unexplained absences were officially recorded. (However, in surveying school attendance records for the longitudinal study schools, it was found that these records were often incomplete and were not always merged with daily attendance rolls.) These records appear to be used as a basis for initiating contact with parents regarding unexplained student absences. Eighty percent of schools reported that they contacted parents. Survey responses indicated that some schools (10%) implement internal procedures (e.g. disciplinary action) to deal with inadequately explained school non-attendance; of these, 60 percent were non-government schools.

Another feature of school practices concerned with student non-attendance relates to the duration of unexplained absence before implementation of school action. One day's unexplained absence is sufficient for 40 percent of schools to take some action, while 44 percent of schools reported that no action is taken until a student has been absent for 2-3 days. A smaller group of schools (16%) reported tht action is not normally taken until students are absent for 4 days or more. Non-government schools appear to be more likely to initiate action within a school day following an unexplained absence, whereas government schools reported that they tend to delay action until a student had been absent for 2 or 3 consecutive days.

Apart from disciplinary action or internal referral within schools to a 'pupil welfare coordinator', schools may also contact other agencies, especially in their attempts to deal with students who they believe to be persistent or chronic truants. The two major agencies contacted by schools are Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services of the Education Department (60% of schools sampled) and the School Attendance Program of the Department of Community Welfare Services (53% of schools sampled).

According to 58 percent of schools, the time spent on administering procedures to monitor and respond to school non-attendance is significant. This administration required the commitment of various internal school resources. With respect to persistent non-attenders, half of the schools surveyed (49%) reported that adequate resources were not available (16% of nongovernment schools and 67% of government schools reported inadequate resources). Most of the schools reporting inadequate resources indicated that increasing staffing complements and increasing involvement from external agencies would improve the resource capacity for dealing with persistent non-attenders. Nonetheless, when asked to comment on whether rates of school non-attendance had increased over the past few years, 71 percent of schools reported no increase, 9 percent reported an increase and 10 percent were unsure.

It is clear that schools have institutionalised a set of procedures for monitoring and responding to school non-attendance, although some variations in the intensity, approach and committed resources of these procedures are apparent. Schools view these procedures as necessary for responding to individual cases of truancy. Within schools, a structural imperative exists whereby surveillance and control procedures are required such that individual cases of truancy can be detected and intervention steps can be implemented. Schools have a responsibility for dealing with truancy by treating individual cases or referring individual cases to other agencies. It is not surprising, therefore, that many schools tend to confront truancy phenomenon in terms of resource requirements which they regard as necessary for an effective control system. Accordingly, perhaps, schools seem more likely to adopt a view that truancy has its foundation in factors outside the control procedures and sphere of influence of schools.

The arguments and evidence put forward in this report encourage another view of truant behaviour, a view which focusses on the role of the school in promoting those characteristics among individual students which may lead to truant behaviour. While control procedures seem necessary, the effective prevention of truancy may well lie in strategies which more directly address the interactions between schools, schooling and young people (see section 7.3).

7.2 Major Research Findings

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, truancy, although defined as unexplained or unacceptable school non-attendance, cannot be regarded simply as a problem of young people not attending school. The literature identifies the behaviour as a multifactor phenomenon which may be related to characteristics of the individual, family, school and peer group. In this study, it has been argued that an understanding of the relative contributions of these characteristics needs to be incorporated into in a larger explanatory framework which takes into account the structure and functions of our social institutions, the social role of secondary school students and the status of young people in general. Accordingly, available literature was integrated such that an examination of the data presented in this research would enable some articulation of the interactional processes that exist between various theoretical perspectives about truancy.

In this study, five major research objectives (see Chapter 1) were examined. Findings with respect to these descriptive and theoretical objectives have been comprehensively discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Rather than reiterate all of these findings here, this section provides an overview of the salient features of this study which indicates some directions for future policy and program development designed to address the problem of truancy. It needs to be recalled that the major data base for this report is a longitudinal panel study of 2378 secondary school students, although findings from student-conducted case studies, discussions with school, welfare and police personnel and a survey of Victorian secondary schools have been incorporated with the literature.

Measuring truancy, as in defining truancy, is a difficult task. Rather than rely upon one measure of truancy, this study has provided two measures of truancy which identify various degrees of school non-attendance in both the compulsory and post-compulsory years of schooling. One measure, self-reported truancy, provides yearly estimates of truant behaviour for Years 9 to 11, whereas the other is an official measure of term estimates within Years 7 to 11 accessed from school attendance records. The measures are not directly comparable but provide two perspectives - that of students and that of schools - about the research questions.

With regard to the student self-reported measure of truant behaviour, this research indicated that the incidence of truancy across the secondary school years peaks after Year Nine. In terms of incidence patterns for the student group who truant regularly (i.e. once per week or more), little difference was noted across Years 9 to 11. At some time during these years more than half of the panel (58%) reported some involvement in truant behaviour and no significant difference in the extent of truancy across the various levels of truancy was found between males and females. While a sizable proportion of secondary school students reported some involvement, truant behaviour for most students was found to be of an episodic nature in that there was little persistence in truancy from one year to the next (see Chapter 4). Finally, the distribution patterns of self-reported truancy indicated that at sometime during Years 9 to 11 the size of the so-called chronic truant group (i.e. more than once per week throughout the school year) in any year was found to be about 5 percent of the panel, or about 9 percent of those students who reported some truant behaviour. In other words, within school years only a relatively small proportion of truanting students appears to consist of chronic truants but, nonetheless, this proportion is substantially greater than the size of the truant population referred to Victorian School Attendance Program officers.

General support for these findings was found from the official truancy data. These indicated that the extent of officially recorded truancy occurring within schools increases from Year 7 to Year 9, while in Years 10 and 11 it fluctuates from one term to the next but the extent was less than in Year Nine. These school data indicate that roughly somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of secondary school students engage in truant behaviour at any point in time during secondary school. While involvement occurs to varying extents, it was found that the proportion of students who truant regularly (i.e. 9 days or more per school term) was of the order of 4 to 5 percent of the panel. In addition, school records indicated that virtually all students were recorded as having had at least one day's officially recorded unexplained absence at sometime during Years 7 to 11. The official data, like the self-report data, suggest that the patterns of engagement in truancy are not consistent across school years or, more particularly, across school terms. Chapter 4 suggested that for many students, truancy is an episodic behaviour and one which cannot be regarded as a permanent feature of their school careers.

Schools' records revealed that the size of the chronic truant group (i.e. 13 or more days per school term) which may be identified at any time from Years 7 to 11 was greater than that found for the self-report data (12% compared with 5% for the self-report group). This may suggest that if school attendance records are used as the basis for the identification of chronic truants, a sizeable proportion of the student population is susceptible to school-initiated intervention. Common knowledge and current school practices, on the other hand, suggest that this figure of 12 percent is a substantial overestimate of the extent of chronic truancy in schools. Allowing for the strong likelihood that school records are not accurately maintained, and even if the lower estimate of 5 percent provided from the self-report data was used, it would appear from their school attendance monitoring procedures that Victorian secondary schools are identifying a substantial proportion of their student populations as potential clients of formal institutional responses to truant behaviour.

Discussions with school staff and correspondence received from schools responding to the survey of principals suggest that the proportion of the secondary school student population commonly referred to as chronically truant is less than 5 percent and probably less than 1 percent. It would seem, therefore, that school monitoring procedures are but one aspect of the process of identifying chronic truants. Other procedures, such as the informal labelling of students as 'trouble makers', are likely to play an unmeasured but significant role in the identification of students as chronic truants requiring institutional intervention, either at the school level or through the network of referral agencies described in Chapter 3 and discussed in Appendix 2. Further research is required in order to establish the particuar school processes which lead some of the non-attending students to be labelled such that they are liable for responses generally assumed to be appropriate for chronic truants. Research, perhaps of an ethnographic kind (e.g. Petrie, 1983), might identify the relationship between characteristics of individual students, labelling and official school reponses to truancy. Nonetheless, the incidence data over time, as reported in Chapter 4, do not support the notion that involvement in truant behaviour for most students is a persistent activity and, therefore, this study questions the efficacy of programs which have as their rationale the early identification of truants.

Data presented in Chapter 4 indicated that evidence for definitive relationships between two family background characteristics (socioeconomic status and parental educational expectations) and truant behaviour is questionable. On the other hand, significant bivariate relationships between structural features of Victorian secondary schools, particularly the system affiliation of schools, and truancy were found.

Of more importance, however, were data which indicated that the status of students within schools is closely connected with involvement in truant behaviour. This status, defined by student perceptions of educational achievement compared with peers and occupational aspirations for the future, contributes to a key aspect of student perceptions of school, namely its relevance, purpose and importance. Together these three social psychological factors provided some assessment of features concerning student commitment to school. For both the self-report and official truancy measures, truancy was found to be more prevalent among those students who had lower levels of relative educational achievement and more negative perceptions of the importance of school and schooling; generally those young people who are not well placed in the success flow of schools.

Another institutional arena addressed in this study was the influence of peer group attachment on truant behaviour. As was observed from the literature discussed in Chapter 3, connections between school and deviant behaviour among young people have increasingly emphasised the role of differential peer group attachments. The data reported for both the self-reported and officially recorded measures of truancy are consistent with the literature in this regard. It appears that students who engage in truancy, particularly higher levels of truancy, are more likely to form attachments with peers whom they regard as not academically successful, in trouble, truants and/or early school leavers. The path analysis discussed in Chapter 6 provides further supporting evidence of the relative importance of peer group attachment to truancy; for either measure, students who were attached to trouble-oriented peers were more likely to engage in truant behaviour.

The relative influence of the family and the school in the formation of peer groups was also examined through path analysis and the data suggested that attachment to trouble-oriented peers is directly related to lower parental educational expectations, lower school climate and negative attitudes toward school and schooling. It should be noted, however, that family factors contribute to student attitudes concerning the importance of school and schooling, a key factor which influences peer group attachment. Some differences in the paths of influence were found for males and females (see section 6.2).

For the entire population of students examined in this study the model of truancy is particularly informative in that it identifies two key factors in explaining truant behaviour (and to a lesser extent juvenile deliquency); namely, school commitment (school importance and school success) and peer group attachment. The model identifies the central role of schooling in the lives of young people and demonstrates the relative significance of the status origins of their families and their schooling experiences in establishing a commitment to school and schooling. The longitudinal data therefore establish the school (both in an organisational and educational sense) and the interactions of the school with young people as critical determinants of involvement in troublesome behaviours.

In sum, these data suggest that the target for truancy prevention strategies should be the school and not the family; schools are also more amenable than the family to truancy policy initiatives. The need to focus on schools in preventing or reducing such behaviour is a conclusion supported by the student-conducted case studies. Each case study identified the role of school practices and school curricula, rather than the family, as significant 'causes' of truant behaviour.

With regard to juvenile delinquency, the school was also identified as important in explaining delinquent behaviour. The relationship between school importance and peer group attachment has been previously discussed. Students who were attached to trouble-oriented peer groups and/or reported involvement in truant behaviour were more likely to have acquired a police charge for delinquent offences. It is important to recognise that school records of non-attenders had no significant relationship with juvenile deliquency (see Chapter 6). These findings sugget that a measure of truancy derived from student self-report data offers an indication of likely involvement in official delinquent behaviour whereas official school records do not. This relationship between truancy and juvenile deliquency, however, was found to be one of association (and not of a causal kind) by virtue of findings which indicated that both behaviours were related to similar underlying school-related factors.

7.3 Truancy Prevention Strategies

If truancy is often a response to lowered student status and lowered school commitment (two features of schooling experiences that result from current school organisational and educational practices), strategies to reduce and prevent truant behaviour must have explicit reference to these aspects of schooling. Consequently, institutional structures which are charged with primary responsibilities for treating the truancy problem should be located in the education system. This is not to say that social welfare agencies do not have a role in responding to truant behaviour of some young people; for some, truancy may be the product of family circumstances which require intervention through the processes of social welfare. However, the data presented in this report support arguments for shifting official responsibility for formal truancy programs in Victoria from the Departmet of Community Welfare Services to the Education Department, given that educational issues lie at the centre of a general explanation of truancy.

If schools are to exercise effective reponsibility for treating cases of truancy, record-keeping systems for purposes of monitoring patterns of school attendance need to be comprehensive and from this study appear to require considerable improvement. Records alone, however, are not enough. There are three reasons why there is inherent danger in allocating resources mainly to the maintenance of attendance reports. First, while accurate records may be necessary for monitoring the extent of truancy occurring in the student population, they do not guarantee that schools will provide appropriate responses to reduce the extent of truant behaviour. Second, records are only one source of information used to identify individual students who are regarded as in need of intervention. Informal labelling processes and teachers' decisions regarding individual students may be more important in the identification of truanting students. Third and most importantly, emphasis upon surveillance strategies can divert school attention from the underlying causes of truant behaviour.

Schools should not rely solely on measures which can only provide certain students with negative labels and which constitute a control approach for reducing truant behaviour. Instead, strategies which expand schooling experiences whereby all students can acquire positive labels (i.e. the promotion of success rather than failure) and can engage in rewarding experiences, that is a prevention orientation to responding to truant behaviour, should be encouraged. Organisational labels (e.g. 'bright student', 'slow learner') are central to our understanding of student success and failure, as well as to our understanding of conforming or troublesome behaviour (see Polk et al., 1981, for further discussion). School attendance records, because of their intent and purpose, can only provide non-attending students with negative labels. For schools to facilitate the reform of truant behaviour, or to prevent such behaviour, organisational practices need reshaping in order that the student population has increased access to successful and meaningful roles. These roles can provide students with a greater sense of positive status in the school.

What can be done? It may be that truancy is episodic for some students because it is a reaction to day-to-day problems encountered with subjects and/or teachers or simply a desire to have a 'day-off' school (see Students Perspectives on Truancy). If, however, as suggested by the data presented in this report, there is some significant connection between truant behaviour and students' perceived placement within the school success flow, some reassessment of the practices and functions of schools is warranted. As Knight (1984) argues, school-based change for prevention of alienation and discipline problems must be rooted in both the curriculum and process of schooling in order that all students are integrated into the educational life of schools (as distinct from some being marginalised). Accordingly, changes in school curriculum, student governance, teacher-student relationships, assessment practices, student participation and school-community interaction are all issues that require attention (e.g. see Hannan, 1982; Withers and Cornish, 1984; Johnson, 1981; Emmett et al., 1984; Knight, 1984). Changes in these areas need to encourage responsive and democratic forms of schooling for all students. They also need to discourage perspectives and responses to troublesome behaviour that focus on individual deficit notions about students. As the problem of truancy is fundamentally a problem which lies within contemporary schools, its prevention must be directed at these features of schools.

Obviously, school contexts vary and, therefore, it is unreasonable to propose a single strategy which can be adopted in all these settings. Nonetheless, it is possible to suggest a set of pedagogical and organisational principles which can be adapted to suit the differing needs and circumstances of schools (e.g. see Jones et al., 1982). Programs based on these principles which have operated at the class level but are consistent with overall school change have been referred to as youth action or youth participation and have operated in Victorian schools for some time (e.g. Knight, 1980; Holdsworth, 1982).

The underlying pedagogical and organisational principles of youth action programs are, by definition, concerned with youth policies that attempt to meet the needs of all youth, with the central focus being the development and implementation of policies that improve the quality of life for youth in our modern society. The concept of youth action stresses the roles adopted by youth in schools, work and the community. This perspective, which values youth and the contribution they make to society, is woven together to develop programs that focus on creating positive experiences for young people (e.g. Cole, 1981; Pearl et al., 1978; Polk and Kobrin, 1972). Such programs are explicit attempts to change the roles of young people within schools and society in ways which improve their status within school and commitment to schooling.

It is relevant to remind the reader that a component of this study was based on the principles of youth action. This component, which resulted in the 1984 report Student Perspectives on Truancy employed 40 students, some of whom were identified by schools as truants, to undertake research. As a youth action strategy, this component was designed to create positive attitudes among the student researchers, to change patterns of peer group attachment by forming teams of students that crossed traditional boundaries (i.e. age, year level, successful and troublesome student groupings) and to provide the students with an opportunity to perform regarding, meaningful and useful school-related tasks. This example provides a small scale illustration of how positive school commitment and positively oriented peer group attachment can be enhanced through structuring schooling experiences that act as a counter to the marginalisation of youth in schools and the emergent processes of alienation and troublesome behaviour.

Programs of this kind are purposively structured to initiate changes in the nature, processes and operation of schools: features that are critical in attempts to address the problem of truancy. (It is worth noting that student researchers did not truant while the program was in operation.) Further, it has been argued that responsibility for addressing truant behaviour should, logically, rest with the education system rather than the welfare system. The evidence provided by this study identified the school as a critical component in the promotion of truant behaviour. Accordingly, it appears that school initiatives to address this behaviour should, at the very least, be grounded in alterations to everyday school practices, procedures and curriculum policies. The problem of truancy might be tackled with a prevention (as opposed to a control) orientation by addressing issues such as: the allocation of fewer resources to the custodial processes concerning school attendance; the need to encourage approaches to student learning which cross traditional class/age/ability groupings; and the need to provide all students with opportunities for the development of competencies in performing useful and successful educational activities. Without educational change the problem of truancy is likely to remain a significant issue for students, schools and the community.

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APPENDIX 1

SAMPLING AND ATTRITION

This appendix addresses some of the technical issues associated with the sampling frame employed in the VISE longitudinal panel study. It provides a description of the sampling frame, the weighting procedure employed to compensate for over-sampling of minor strata and discusses the extent and possible effects of attrition over the three waves of data collection.

The Sampling Frame

The intention of the VISE longitudinal panel study was to follow a group of Year 9 students in Victorian secondary schools through their transition from school to work or other post-school activities. As such, the selected sample needed to be representative of the Year 9 Victorian secondary school population. For this purpose, a single-stage proportionate sampling strategy was employed with the strata structured around the major systematic characteristics of schools. The three variables selected as the basis for stratification were geographical region, school system, and the coeducational or single-sex status of the student population of the school. Using these variables, the identification of 36 strata was possible.

The actual representation of each stratum in the population (see Table 1) was determined from estimates of the number of secondary students in each school in the strata, excluding special schools and those in which no Year 9 students were enrolled. These were based on the 1979 enrolment figures for catholic schools and the 1978 enrolment figures for government and independent schools.

After classifying all schools eligible for entry into the sample according to the strata, 11 strata contained no schools, resulting in 25 non-empty strata. Of these, 9 were eliminated from the sampling frame because they contained fewer than 1 percent of Victorian secondary students. In three instances, country and provincial strata were combined to form 3 pseudo-strata that would be represented in the sample. Thus the final number of strata in the sampling frame was thirteen. The percentage of secondary students in each stratum is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Victorian Secondary School Students in Population Strata

(percentage)

	SINGLE-SEX			COEDUCATIONAL		
	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country
School System:						
Government high	3	-	-	34	6	13
Government technical	5	3*		7	5*	
Catholic	11	2	-	-	-	2
Independent	7	-	-	-	2*	

* Percentage in pseudo-stratum.

The number of schools necessary to attain the appropriate sample stratum proportions were randomly selected from each stratum on the basis of an average school enrolment. In the cases where more than one school was selected, schools were ordered according to size and then systematically selected to ensure that a range of school sizes was obtained within the strata.

This strategy resulted in 26 schools being selected for the initial 1980 survey. In all, 2378 Year 9 students were surveyed. However, during machine processing, 76 students' questionnaires were destroyed and another 2 students provided no identification and could not be allocated to a stratum. The distribution of the remaining 2300 students among the strata and their associated sample proportions are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Students in the Sample Strata

(percentage in parentheses)

	SINGLE-SEX			COEDUCATIONAL		
	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country
School System:						
Government high	57 (2)	- -	- -	580 (25)	188 (8)	166 (7)
Government technical	171 (7)	150 (7)		173 (8)	62 (3)	
Catholic	369 (16)	106 (5)	- -	- -	- -	53 (2)
Independent	183 (8)	-	-	-	42 (2)	

Attrition

Characteristically, longitudinal studies are faced with the problem of attrition. The variables dealing with self-reported truancy in 1980-82 and items on peer group associations were obtained from the third wave of the longitudinal survey carried out in 1983. Respondent loss over this period is therefore of relevance to the study as the effective sample size for all analyses involving these truancy-related variables was limited to the number of third wave respondents (N=1914). It may be noted that 59 of the students whose wave 1 survey questionnaires were destroyed, responded to the wave 3 survey questionnaire.

Return and attrition rates for each wave of data collection are presented in Table 3. These data indicate that the rate of respondent loss was reduced between waves 2 and 3, compared with the rate between waves 1 and two. Even so the 20% loss, although not excessive for this type of study, has implications for the analytic procedures adopted.

TABLE 3

Attrition in the Longitudinal Study: Waves 1 - 3

	Number of Questionnaires Distributed	Percent Returned	Original Panel Percent Loss
Time of Data Collection:			
1980	2378	97	3
1981	2378	87	13
1983	2316	83	20*

* 8 percent of this loss appears due to lack of address information.

It is possible that respondent loss may be correlated with the variables under study which could bias the relevant statistics. While it is not possible to test this hypothesis directly, the extent to which the attrition was evenly distributed across the strata and its effect on some key variables from the first survey may be observed. Table 4 presents the percentage of panel members from each strata remaining in the sample for the third wave of the survey in 1983.

TABLE 4

Initial Panel Remaining in 1983 Survey

(percentage)

	SINGLE-SEX			COEDUCATIONAL		
	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country
School System:						
Government high	79	-	-	77	82	88
Government technical	70	69		69	76	
Catholic	86	86	-	-	-	91
Independent	87	-	-	-	81	

Chi-square = 65.64, $p < .001$

Significant differences exist between the proportions of each strata remaining in the panel at wave 3. The losses tend to reflect the differential movement of students out of education, and as the propensity to leave school has been shown to be related to truant activity (Chapters 4 and 5), it is likely that biases are present in the data.

Table 5 provides some indication of the extent and direction of bias by presenting respondent loss for some key characteristics of the panel; the gender of the respondents (GENDER), their family socioeconomic status (SES), the job status to which they aspire (BJZA), their attitudes towards the importance of school (SCLIMP) and their parents' aspirations for their education (PEASP).

TABLE 5

Respondent Loss for some Key Characteristics

		N	Percent Retained	Percent Loss	Chi-Square	P
Key Characteristics:						
GENDER	Male	1,173	77	23	14.7	.001
	Female	1,127	83	17		
SES	Low	761	77	23		
	Medium	803	78	22	18.5	.001
	High	736	85	15		
BJZA	Un/semi-skilled	325	75	25		
	Skilled/white collar	661	74	26	35.0	.001
	Managerial/professional	986	85	15		
SCLIMP	Low	809	75	25		
	Medium	742	81	19	19.8	.001
	High	749	84	16		
PEASP	Before Year 12	183	67	33		
	End of Year 12	1,637	82	18	28.2	.001
	Don't know	435	76	24		

The demographic data reported in Tables 4 and 5 indicate that there is a tendency for losses to be somewhat biased in the direction of such factors as males, government (particularly technical) schools, lower socioeconomic status, less supportive parents, lower occupational aspirations, and those with more negative attitudes toward school.

Considering the biases present in the data, some caution should be exercised in interpreting any univariate statistics reported in this study. However, consistent with the findings from other panel studies - see Polk and Courdray (1984), Sewell and Hauser (1977) and Williams _et al_. (1980) - attrition in the VISE longitudinal study does not appear to significantly affect relationships among the main explanatory variables. Consequently, the bivariate and multivariate statistics reported in this study can be considered as unbiased estimates of the strength of these relationships.[1] This is demonstrated in Table 6 which presents the intercorrelations for some of the key wave 1 variables for the original, wave 3, and weighted cohorts.

Weighting

The differences in the strata sizes apparent in Tables 1 and 2 are a result of cluster sampling, and arise from the variability of school enrolments. Thus, certain biases are present even prior to attrition. To counteract the biases produced by cluster sampling and attrition, weights were applied to the sample strata so that the proportion of students in each reflected the actual proportions pertaining to Year 9 students in the Victorian secondary school population in 1980.

The strata weights (W) were computed according to the formula:

$$W = \frac{N_s \, n}{N \, n_s}$$

where N_s = population for stratum s
N = total population ($N = \sum_s N_s$)
n_s = sample size for stratum s
n = total sample size ($n = \sum_s n_s$).

---

[1] An exception to this general finding was noted for relationships between the truancy measures and the background variables.

TABLE 6

Inter-Correlation Matrix of Some Key Variables: Original (i.e. Wave 1)*, Retained (i.e. Wave 3) and Weighted Samples

	GENDER	SES	BJZA	SCLIMP	PEASP
GENDER		.022a .020b .022c	.030 .012 .019	.061 .057 .068	.136 .119 .131
SES	.002d .000e		.138 .144 .148	.116 .111 .143	.168 .155 .153
BJZA	.018 .011	.006 .010		.290 .293 .337	.370 .375 .374
SCLIMP	.004 .007	.005 .027	.003 .047		.283 .260 .319
PEASP	.017 .005	.013 .015	.005 .004	.023 .036	

* The original samples and retained samples are weighted to compensate for discrepancies in the sampling frame between the original sample and population strata proportions, whereas the weighted sample compensates for attrition as well.

a Correlation coefficient based on original sample.
b Correlation coefficient based on retained sample.
c Correlation coefficient after weighting for wave 3 attrition.
d Absolute difference between coefficients for original and retained samples.
e Absolute difference between coefficients for original and weighted samples.

_NB_: None of the differences given in the lower triangle are significant.

The weights appropriate for the wave 3 variables were obtained by dividing the population proportions provided in Table 1 by the corresponding wave 3 sample proportions provided in Table 4. A similar process was followed with regard to variables obtained from the official school records and for the intersection of these two sample groups. Thus, three distinct weights were employed throughout this study in an attempt to be similarly representative of the State regardless of the source of the data. Tables 7a, 7b and 7c give the strata weights obtained by this process.

TABLE 7a

Strata Weights for the 1983 Survey

	SINGLE-SEX			COEDUCATIONAL		
	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country
School System:						
Government high	1.259	-	-	1.384	.731	1.637
Government technical	.774	.535		1.084	1.928	
Catholic	.639	.415	-	-	-	.727
Independent	.782	-	-	-	.969	

TABLE 7b

Strata Weights for the School Attendance Records

	SINGLE-SEX			COEDUCATIONAL		
	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country
School System:						
Government high	1.062	-	-	1.417	.684	1.681
Government technical	.583	.412		.851	1.653	
Catholic	.610	.443	-	-	-	.840
Independent	1.934	-	-	-	2.017	

TABLE 7c

Strata Weights for the Intersection of the 1983 Survey and School Attendance Records

	SINGLE-SEX			COEDUCATIONAL		
	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country	Metropolitan	Provincial	Country
School System:						
Government high	1.109	-	-	1.414	.648	1.555
Government technical	.687	.471		.962	1.697	
Catholic	.577	.416	-	-	-	.739
Independent	1.712	-	-	-	1.848	

Although this post-weighting procedure does not include additional strata based on other background characteristics it can alter the effective distributions of these major explanatory variables and help reduce the biases present for the univariate statistics. Table 8 gives the adjusted loss associated with the weighted strata for the same variables presented in Table 5. The introduction of weighting had no positive effect in reducing the bias associated with structural variables such as gender and socioeconomic status, but did reduce the non-response bias for attitudinal-type variables such as the students' perceptions of the importance of schooling and parents' educational expectations and to a lesser extent for occupational aspirations.

TABLE 8

Adjusted Respondent Loss for some Key Characteristics

		N	Adjusted Percent retained	Adjusted Percent Loss	Chi-Square	P
Key Characteristics:						
GENDER	Male	1,173	76	24	19.72	< .001
	Female	1,127	83	17		
SES	Low	761	76	24		
	Medium	803	79	21	19.39	< .001
	High	736	85	15		
BJZA	Un/semi-skilled	325	79	21		
	Skilled/white collar	661	75	25	17.43	< .001
	Managerial/professional	986	84	16		
SCLIMP	Low	809	77	23		
	Medium	742	81	19	6.21	< .05
	High	749	82	18		
PEASP	Before Year 12	183	74	26		
	End of Year 12	1,637	81	19	5.08	< .05
	Don't know	435	82	18		

The weighting procedure had a negligible effect on the relationships between variables. Table 6 depicts the correlations before and after the application of weighting and the magnitude of the difference from the original sample. None of the differences are significant at the .05 level.

On the basis of these analyses it would appear that while sample bias may present some problems for univariate estimates, it does not constitute a problem for multivariate relationships. Although slight differences between the two samples exist they do not seriously distort the picture and, therefore, generalisations may be drawn with reasonable confidence.

APPENDIX 2

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO TRUANCY

It is important to consider institutional procedures used to monitor and respond to truant behaviour. However, little is known about the particular processes by which some truants come to the attention of school and welfare authorities, while others do not. Although it was not within the ambit of this study to attempt to investigate differential enforcement of school attendance regulations, a consideration of educational and social welfare procedures used to respond to truancy may be informative for future policy purposes.

The following discussion provides a brief account of the roles played by various agencies in the detection and 'treatment' of truants. The information is drawn from legislation/regulations and discussions with senior staff of the School Attendance Program, Community Policing Squad, 'special purpose' schools and the Children's Protection Society; agencies which, together with schools, form a network for responding to truancy (see Figure 3.1).

It should be noted that, for the most part, these institutions do not deal specifically or solely with truants. However, they are involved in the referral network in the sense that they represent reference points for formal institutional action regarding truants.

1. Parental Responsibility for School Attendance

When describing the avenues for action in regard to school attendance/non-attendance, it must be remembered that the parent of every school age child is responsible for her/his child's attendance at school. The parent/guardian is legally obligated to ensure that his/her child does in fact attend school:

> 'The parents of every child at school age shall, unless there is a reasonable excuse for the child's non-attendance, cause such child to attend a State school on every school half day in each week'
> (Education Act, 1958, sub-section 53, (1))

Further, reasonable excuse is defined as follows:

> 'It shall be a reasonable excuse as regards any child that -
>
> (a) the child is under efficient and regular instruction in some other manner and is complying with the like conditions of attendance as are required under this section with regard to attendance at State schools;
>
> (b) the child has been prevented from attending school by sickness, reasonable fear of infection, temporary or permanent infirmity or any unavoidable cause;
>
> (c) the child has been excused by a general or particular order of the Minister; or
>
> (d) there is no State school which the child can attend within a distance (measured according to the nearest practicable route) from the residence of the child -
>
> (i) of three kilometres if the child is under nine years of age; or
>
> (ii) of five kilometres if the child is at least nine years of age -
> and that the child is being educated by correspondence tuition.'

(Education Act, 1958, sub-section 53, (3))

The parent, therefore, is ultimately responsible for the school attendance of his/her child. As such, institutional action which is taken in regard to school attendance by anyone representing an official institution must be mediated through the parent (i.e. the parent must be informed and cooperation sought).

2. The Education Department

Although the Education Department in Victoria is no longer legislatively responsible for responding to cases of persistent school non-attendance, the department has responsibility for any action taken within schools, and makes available to schools a department which provides special services with regard to truancy: Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services, provides such a service in Victoria.

2.1 The School and Mechanisms Within the School

The organisational climate of the school, together with school attendance records, form the basis for deciding whether any action should be taken for non-attendance: while legislation stipulates that the initial responsibility for school attendance rests with parents, schools have a responsibility to maintain accurate attendance records as well as written information concerning reasons for non-attendance. In this sense the school has the responsibility for providing proof of non-attendance. Once it is established that a student has truanted (see definition, Chapter 1), the school may initiate internal procedures or refer the student to an external agency.

What are the options for action within the school? Commonly, the teacher who marks attendance rolls is the first person in the school to identify absences. The absence may be reported to senior staff in the school and attendance is strictly monitored by the school, the parents are contacted as soon as possible. If normal attendance patterns are resumed, the matter is generally closed.

If, however, the pattern and incidence of truancy continues parents are re-contacted usually by the Principal, the Deputy Principal, a Year-Level Coordinator or the Pupil Welfare Coordinator. Usually the student is interviewed by the school in order to identify the 'reason' for non-attendance. The Year Level Coordinator or the Pupil Welfare Coordinator may monitor the students' attendance and offer assistance to both parent and student. If truancy continues, after all possible action has been taken within the school, students may be referred to Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services, 'special purpose' schools or the School Attendance Program of the Department of Community Welfare Services.

2.2 Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services (CG & CS)

Although external to individual schools, CG & CS of the Education Department provides specialised support for schools with respect to individuals whose problems cannot be resolved by personnel within the school. CG & CS offers a range of services such as intensive counselling, psychological appraisal and treatment, speech therapy and consultative services to teachers. Some of these are considered appropriate in responding to certain cases of truant behaviour.

2.3 'Special Purpose' Schools

In some cases, after consultation between parents, the school and CG & CS, students are referred to a 'special purpose' school. Presently, there are very few of these schools. 'Special purpose' schools are physically separate from mainstream schools and are concerned with creating an environment which is more compact and therefore may facilitate a closer relationship between the student and the teacher. The objective appears to be the provision of a form of schooling whereby attendance and learning improves. It is intended that the child be returned to the mainstream school when a regular attendance pattern has been established and any attendant social or psychological problems have been treated or resolved. It must be noted, however, that these schools usually restrict intake to children at either upper primary or lower secondary level, as staff of these schools consider that 'remediation' after these years is more generally unsuccessful.

3. The Department of Community Welfare Services

Under current legislation, the Department of Community Welfare Services (DCWS) is legislatively responsible for cases of school non-attendance in Victoria (see Community Welfare Services Act, 1970). As such, DCWS has established a School Attendance Program with a complement of 18 field officers. The program is structured such that the Attendance Officers act as intermediaries in the case of action being taken for non-attendance at school; schools may contact the Attendance Officer for their area after all efforts on their part have failed to return the student to regular attendance.

Upon referral, the Attendance Officer is expected to contact the parents of the child to inform them of possible prosecution; if this fails to have any effect, a written, official warning is sent to the parents. If the student is still found to be truanting, the Magistrate's Court may hear a case against the parents and a fine may be applied. The focus of action, therefore, is changed from the child to the parents. More often, however, the Attendance Officer investigates the family background of the child in order to identify possible reasons for truancy. If problems within the family are found, the Attendance Officer may refer the case to a department social worker. Where subsequent investigation reveals that the child is being maltreated or neglected (argued to be a possible cause of truancy), a Care and Protection Application may be lodged with the Children's Court to take the child into 'care'.

Alternatively, if this invesigation indicates the truancy is more related to the school, liaison with the school occurs either through the department social worker or, more commonly, through the School Attendance Officer in order to determine appropriate school action. (This can include referral to a 'special purpose' school.)

3.1 The Children's Protection Society

This agency forms another component of the referral network and one which is formally attached to the Department of Community Welfare Services. Although not dealing exclusively or specifically with truants, the Children's Protection Society forms another entry point in the referral network in that the Society deals with children who have come to its attention via reports from the school or others concerning maltreatment or neglect.

These reports may form the basis for an application to be lodged with the Children's Court for the child to be taken into 'care'. Alternatively, the Society may refer the family and the truanting child to a DCWS social worker for counselling and treatment.

4. The Victoria Police: Community Policing Squads

The Community Policing Squads, as members of the Victoria Police, are required to apprehend and process juvenile offenders. In the course of these duties squads may also operate in a welfare capacity when information concerning the offender's family background indicates that referral to a social worker would be in the best interests of the child.

It needs to be recognised that the police do not have legislative power to act in regard to truancy alone. However, if a juvenile is sighted on the street during school hours, members of the Community Policing Squads may question her or him in an attempt to ascertain whether she/he should be attending school.

5. Summary

What is done about truancy? How is action carried out? Who implements action? Such questions have provided debate, consternation and confusion among agencies/institutions which come into contact with truants. Despite a shift of major institutional responsibility for problem cases with respect to school non-attendance (i.e. from the Education Department to the Department of Community Welfare Services), confusion about the effectiveness of school attendance enforcement and responses to non-attendance persists. It must be recalled, however, that the initiation of action by the network of agencies decribed above is dependent upon the extent to which parents exercise responsibility for regular school attendance.

As the school is the key institution of the network, its view of truancy and the internal resources it has available to deal with the problem form the basis for decision-making about response options. In this regard, knowledge about other available agencies (such as the School Attendance Program) influences decisions about external referral. Parents must be consulted at each step and their cooperation sought with respect to parental legal responsibility for school non-attendance action. Such requirements make the task all the more difficult.

The School Attendance Program generally becomes involved with truancy at the discretion of the school. Under current regulations, Attendance Officers may only be contacted if truancy has been identified by schools and all school efforts to address the problem have been made. Due to the structure of this program which provides only 18 School Attendance Officers for the State of Victoria, it has not been possible to provide intensive and thorough intervention. An additional problem is that there is often a time lag between school identification of a truant and follow-up action being taken, particularly when prosecution of the parents is deemed to be necessary. The DCWS considers prosecution of parents to be a 'last resort' measure.

Even if procedures as outlined by the Education Act, 1958, and the Community Welfare Services Act, 1970, together with regulations governing internal operations of these institutions are followed, some individuals identified as truants may become caught trapped on a cyclical path between referral agencies. This has been argued to be particularly true of 'special purpose' schools. According to staff of two of these schools, the reintegration of referred truants into mainstream schools is problematic. Some students when returned to their previous school re-engage in truant behaviour, making them liable for further referral. Hawkins (1982) argues that referral to such specialised schools may reinforce the negative labelling of students, thereby making their re-entry into mainstream schools difficult.

Dangers exist in the referral network operating for truants. The identification of truant behaviour relies upon accurate attendance records, a knowledge of options for action, and an understanding and appreciation of the circumstances surrounding the initiation and continuance of truancy. Unless these issues are attended to, inappropriate referral patterns may emerge; the child may be disrupted from a 'normal' routine, may acquire a negative label and possibly enter a cyclical pattern of referral, moving from one agency to the next without achieving regular school attendance.

Based upon discussions with the network of agencies involved in identifying and responding to truant behaviour it appears that the referral network commonly used may be described as confusing and potentially stigmatising of students. Further, referral options are not always known to schools which are primarily responsible for the identification of truant behaviour.

APPENDIX 3

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RECORDS

The official attendance records for the 25 base schools remaining in the VISE longitudinal study in 1983 were searched to provide information on the number of mornings, afternoons, and full days that panel members were absent from school in each term for the years 1978 through 1982. These were further subdivided by recording the number of days that the school had assigned as having been satisfactorily explained and those which it had not. Thus, six peices of information were recorded for each member of the panel per term.

This method of recording the data was a compromise between the full record of daily attendance, which would have afforded a more detailed analysis of patterns of non-attendance and perhaps peer linkages, and the exigencies of time and effort involved in recording the data. Also, a number of schools did not use the Education Department rolls to record attendance, and although their daily class lists, attendance cards, and computerised systems possibly integrated well with their administrative systems, many were not amenable to easy recording for the purposes of this study.

As with most retrospective data collection, the records were not complete for a number of reasons. One school had ceased to exist in 1981, hence the approach to only 25 of the original 26 schools. Students may also have left the sampled school after Year 9 and attended others that were not in the study, or, vise-versa, they had attended other schools prior to 1980. For these individuals the data were incomplete. One school had several years of data destroyed in a mouse plague while another had only recently become aware of the need to keep any records at all. Others had on the whole kept records, but as it was generally left to the form teacher to record individual classes within the school inadequate records resulted.

Thus, the official data with regard to absenteeism were punctuated with gaps, and in the case of two schools the extent of the missing data forced their deletion from the panel altogether for analyses dealing with school records. Table 1 indicates the percentage of panel members for whom data were available for each of the terms concerned, and the average number of days absent without adequate explanation.

TABLE 1

Availability of Records of Unexplained Absences from Year 7 Term 1 - Year 11 Term 3

YEAR		7			8			9			10			11	
TERM	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Available Records	1,679	1,773	1,679	1,760	1,760	1,760	1,500	1,477	1,419	1,643	1,607	1,420	1,166	1,134	889
At School	2,378	2,378	2,378	2,378	2,378	2,378	2,370	2,344	2,274	2,231	2,190	1,949	1,895	1,839	1,489
% Available	70.6	74.6	70.6	74.0	74.0	74.0	63.3	63.0	62.4	73.6	73.4	72.9	61.5	59.8	59.7
Average No. of Days Absent	.79	1.31	1.50	1.38	1.72	1.68	1.83	2.23	2.59	1.27	1.88	2.04	1.58	2.13	1.59
Standard Deviation	1.66	2.51	2.68	2.37	2.69	2.56	3.49	4.07	3.90	2.86	3.52	3.99	3.80	4.09	3.76

APPENDIX 4

CREATION OF INDICES

Nine main indices were created for use in the analysis described in this report - socioeconomic status, attitudes towards the importance and value of school and schooling, and the concomitant subscales of attitudes toward teachers and toward school in general, negative peer connections, school size, average school socioeconomic level, the extent of action taken by schools with regard to truancy, and the average attitudinal climate of the school.

There are two major reasons for using indices such as these. If a dimension can be assumed to underly a number of variables, then a combination of them will usually result in a measure with higher reliability than any single indicator by itself. Indices formed in this way will also have several desirable properties. They tend to exhibit the properties of an interval scale and, according to the Central Limit Theorem, will be more normally distributed. These characteristics are of crucial importance in the use of some of the more powerful statistical techniques. The use of these techniques would not be appropriate if strict statistical criteria were applied to some of the individual variables from which the indices are constructed.

Attitudes about the Importance of School and Schooling

This index was created by the addition of 23 items from a version of the Attitude Toward School Inventory (ATSI) developed by Meier and McDaniel (1974) and adapted for use in the VISE longitudinal study. The instrument was chosen because it measured several aspects of attitudes toward school, comprising schoolwork, teachers, and school in general. The authors also reported impressive validity and reliability data; validity was assessed by a multitrait-multimethod matrix of self, peer and teacher ratings, and reliability was assessed by item-total and item subscale correlations, coefficient alpha and the test-retest method.

A modified instrument of 27 items, 11 on schoolwork, 8 about teachers and 8 concerning school in general, was trialed in 1979 (Schrom, 1980). The validity was again checked using a multi-trait-dualmethod validity matrix (Campbell and Fiske, 1959) of the inventory versus self-ratings and the internal reliability for the scales was calculated.

The Scree Test (Cattell, 1966) for the number of underlying factors contained in the inventory, equivocally indicated a 1, 2 or 3 factor solution. Principal component analyses for 1, 2 and 3 factors were carried out, and as it was assumed that the factors underlying atttitudes toward school would be correlated, the factors were obliquely rotated.

All items loaded modestly on the single factor, indicating that a general attitude toward school was a plausible solution. The two factor solution clearly indicated a combined attitude toward schoolwork and school in general factor, and an attitude toward teachers factor, which were correlated at .50. The three factor solution was uninterpretable.

On the basis of these analysis a 23 item inventory was used in the longitudinal study.

The entire 23 items made up the index of attitudes toward the importance of school and schooling used in this study of truancy.

The items were:

1. I don't learn anything important at school.
2. I enjoy school most of the time.
3. None of my teachers really listens to me.
4. I often learn new things at school.
5. I will be glad when I do not have to go to school any more.
6. I like the way my teachers teach their classes.
7. I see no use for what we study at school.
8. I look forward to going to school.
9. Most teachers do not understand young people.
10. I like most of my school subjects.
11. Most teachers at this school are friendly.
12. I like most of the things we do at school.
13. Most teachers are hard to please.

14. It is important to stay on at school.
15. My schoolwork is interesting to me.
16. Going to school is a waste of time.
17. For the most part, I like my teachers.
18. Most schoolwork is dull and boring.
19. I am happy that I go to this school.
20. Most teachers are fair.
21. There is too much work at school.
22. If I had my choice, I would not go to school.
23. I care about my schoolwork.

An analysis of the reliability of the scale was carried out and the results are presented in Table 1. The extent of the common variance of the items may be gauged from the intercorrelation matrix, while the reliability of the index is given by the coefficient alpha. The effect on the alpha if each item was deleted, and the mean and standard deviation for the index are also given.

Subscales: Attitudes toward teachers; Attitudes towards school

The responses to the wave 1 survey were again factor analysed and revealed two main factors: an attitude toward teachers and a combined schoolwork and school in general scale. A principal axes factor analysis with iterations and squared multiple correlations as initial communality estimates was used to extract the two factors which were then obliquely rotated. The factor pattern matrix for this analysis is presented in Table 2.

The two factors were correlated .677, indicating that attitudes toward teachers and toward school in general are strongly related.

Some value judgements were exercised in selecting items for inclusion in both sub-scales. A number of items weighted above .3 on the 'attitude toward school' factor and could have been included but it was decided to take only the six most highly weighted items. These items were:

* 1. I don't learn anything important at school.
* 7. I see no use for what we study.

TABLE 1

Reliability of the Importance of School and Schooling Index

	Intercorrelation of Items																							Alpha if Item Deleted
Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
1	-	.36	.41	.41	.34	.20	.53	.30	.31	.34	.23	.34	.26	.31	.36	.51	.29	.43	.28	.25	.27	.46	.41	.930
2		-	.33	.37	.47	.39	.37	.61	.25	.61	.42	.58	.30	.34	.57	.44	.45	.50	.49	.39	.33	.49	.48	.927
3			-	.30	.30	.39	.39	.30	.44	.32	.34	.27	.38	.24	.33	.37	.35	.40	.32	.34	.28	.38	.35	.930
4				-	.28	.23	.40	.30	.24	.34	.27	.36	.23	.30	.37	.38	.29	.36	.31	.28	.21	.35	.36	.931
5					-	.32	.40	.60	.32	.41	.29	.43	.31	.35	.49	.45	.34	.52	.37	.28	.37	.53	.38	.929
6						-	.27	.38	.35	.41	.42	.43	.35	.21	.43	.28	.44	.39	.42	.40	.24	.29	.33	.930
7							-	.35	.33	.38	.29	.39	.28	.33	.42	.52	.33	.47	.35	.28	.32	.48	.42	.929
8								-	.24	.52	.36	.53	.29	.35	.58	.44	.40	.51	.48	.32	.36	.52	.46	.928
9									-	.24	.32	.21	.44	.18	.28	.32	.31	.38	.29	.30	.32	.29	.28	.931
10										-	.49	.67	.27	.34	.58	.40	.45	.47	.45	.42	.33	.44	.46	.928
11											-	.45	.32	.23	.37	.31	.52	.36	.39	.47	.25	.27	.34	.930
12												-	.27	.34	.57	.43	.44	.48	.51	.40	.35	.45	.46	.928
13													-	.12	.31	.29	.35	.43	.30	.35	.32	.30	.27	.931
14														-	.41	.43	.26	.31	.31	.23	.21	.43	.42	.931
15															-	.48	.43	.54	.46	.39	.34	.49	.55	.927
16																-	.36	.51	.39	.28	.37	.60	.52	.928
17																	-	.41	.45	.44	.27	.36	.42	.929
18																		-	.42	.35	.40	.50	.44	.927
19																			-	.38	.28	.45	.42	.929
20																				-	.22	.30	.33	.930
21																					-	.40	.33	.931
22																						-	.54	.928
23																							-	.928

Alpha for the index = .932 Mean = 80.1 Standard deviation = 14.8

14. It is important to stay on at school.
* 16. Going to school is a waste of time.
* 22. If I had my choice I would not go to school.
23. I care about my schoolwork.

* As these items were negatively worded responses to them were inverted.

TABLE 2

Factor Pattern Matrix

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Item 1	0.68688 *	-0.08312
Item 2	0.31343	0.46328
Item 3	0.28534	0.30112 #
Item 4	0.41655	0.13250
Item 5	0.53152	0.14973
Item 6	-0.06994	0.69161 *
Item 7	0.69420 *	-0.04038
Item 8	0.40258	0.34796
Item 9	0.18346	0.32394 #
Item 10	0.20827	0.57154
Item 11	-0.13131	0.78085 *
Item 12	0.22422	0.54791
Item 13	0.12318	0.39424 #
Item 14	0.54624 *	-0.01295
Item 15	0.42422	0.36627
Item 16	0.82140 *	-0.09986
Item 17	0.01257	0.67679 *
Item 18	0.52253	0.24883
Item 19	0.21745	0.47680
Item 20	-0.04565	0.64978 *
Item 21	0.38970	0.13968
Item 22	0.79096 *	-0.03151
Item 23	0.55045 *	0.17604

Although items 5 and 18 weighted above .5, they were not included. Item 5 - 'I will be glad when I don't have to school any more' - was considered to be inappropriate as those students who thought school was important might still be looking forward to leaving school. Item 18 - 'Most schoolwork is dull and boring' - seemed to be too specifically related to schoolwork to be of relevance to the scale. These two items were therefore ignored as they appeared to have little face validity.

Similarly, with the second factor some discretion was used in selecting items for inclusion in the attitude toward teachers subscale. The four most highly weighted items were selected but three other items with weights in the range .3 to .4 (#) were also included. The items used were:

6. I like the way my teachers teach their classes.
11. Most teachers at this school are friendly.
17. For the most part I like my teachers.
20. Most teachers are fair.
* 3. None of my teachers really listens to me.
* 9. Most teachers do not understand young people.
* 13. Most teachers are hard to please.

* As these items were negatively worded responses to them were inverted. They were also those with the weaker association to the extracted factor.

Item 10 ('I like most of my subjects') and item 12 ('I like most of the things we do at school') although weighted above .5 on this factor were considered to be irrelevant and therefore excluded. The association possibly arose from the affective aspect of the items which is also apparent in items 6 and 17. The resulting dimension for the subscale is somewhat different from the extracted factor but was considered to possess higher content validity.

The resulting subscales and their composite items were subjected to a reliability analysis (see Tables 3 (a) and 3 (b)).

TABLE 3 (a)

Reliability of the Attitudes Toward School Index

Intercorrelation of Items							Alpha if Item Deleted
Items	1	7	14	16	22	23	
1	-	.53	.30	.51	.45	.42	.82
7		-	.33	.52	.49	.42	.81
14			-	.42	.45	.43	.83
16				-	.61	.51	.79
22					-	.54	.80
23						-	.81

Alpha of index = .84
Mean = 23.6
Standard deviation = 4.5

TABLE 3 (b)

Reliability of the Attitudes Toward Teachers Index

Intercorrelation of Items								Alpha if Item Deleted
Items	3	6	9	11	13	17	20	
3	-	.38	.43	.33	.37	.35	.34	.786
6		-	.35	.43	.33	.44	.40	.781
9			-	.32	.44	.31	.30	.789
11				-	.31	.53	.48	.778
13					-	.35	.33	.789
17						-	.44	.778
20							-	.784

Alpha of index = .81
Mean = 22.7
Standard deviation = 4.7

Socioeconomic Status

Six variables were considered for inclusion in an index of socioeconomic status; all were family background measures. These included both father's and mother's occupation, measured on the BJZ occupational status scale (Broom et al., 1966), their level of education, the amount of unemployment experienced by the father, and a dichotomous variable measuring whether the mother worked or not. Similar to other studies (Polk, et al., 1981) only the three variables: father's occupational status, father's education and mother's education, were found to be related to a sufficient extent to justify the creation of a composite index. Table 4 presents the results of an analysis of the reliability of the scale.

TABLE 4

Reliability of the Index of Socioeconomic Status

	Intercorrelation of Variables						Alpha if Item Deleted (*included)
Variable:	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Father's Job	-	.43	.30	.29	.02	.06	.74
2. Father's Education		-	.58	.28	-.06	.05	.46
3. Mother's Edcuation			-	.36	-.09	.02	.60
4. Mother's Job				-	.01	.01	*.70
5. Mother Works?					-	.01	*.50
6. Father's Unemployment						-	*.49

Reliability of SES index = .70
Mean = .06
Standard deviation = 2.4

N.B. Items were standardised prior to analysis.

Although the inclusion of the occupational status of the mother did not reduce the reliability of the index, as only 46.2% of the cohort responded to this item (i.e. almost 54% of mothers were not employed), it was decided not to include it in the index.

Average Socioeconomic Level for the School

This was an aggregate variable obtained by averaging the socioeconomic index of the panel members in each school. It was originally intended to use the socioeconomic status component of the Schools Priority Index constructed for the Supplementary Grants Program, but as this index was only available for government schools and no comparable measure was available for schools run by the catholic and independent systems, recourse to the longitudinal data base was the only means available to obtain this school level variable.

School Climate

This was also an aggregate variable obtained by averaging an index of attitudes and aspirations of panel members in each school. It was constructed to represent the academic/social milieu of the school and comprised the students' attitudes toward school and toward their teachers together with the status of their occupational aspirations. An analysis of the reliability of this index at an individual level is presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Reliability of the Index Underlying the School Climate Measure

	Intercorrelation of Variables			Alpha if Item Deleted
Variables:	1	2	3	
1. Occupational Aspirations	-	.18	.32	.70
2. Attitudes to Teachers		-	.54	.48
3. Attitudes to School			-	.31

Reliability of index = .62
Mean = -.04
Standard deviation = 11.3

Although the inclusion of occupational aspirations reduced the reliability of the index, it was considered to be of substantive relevance to the concept of school climate and was retained. The reduction in the reliability was considered to be of secondary importance to the spatial direction of the index having regard for the fact that it would be averaged across schools. All of the items were standardised prior to the analysis so each had equal weight in the index.

School Size

This index was created from two items contained on the Principals Survey Questionnaire sent to all Victorian schools. The first item related to the number of students in the school and was measured in categories of two hundred from 1 to 1201 +. The second item asked for the number of teachers employed on a full-time basis at the school. The items were standardised prior to being combined. The reliability of this index is given in Table 6.

TABLE 6

Reliability of the School Size Index

	Intercorrelation of Variables		Alpha if Item Deleted
Variables:	1	2	
1. No. of Students	-	.87	-
2. No. of Staff		-	-

Alpha of Index : = .92
Mean = -.08
Standard Deviation = 1.77

School Action

This index was also created from items on the Principals Survey Questionnaire. Five items dealing with the extent of action taken by schools to deal with truancy were included. These were:

1.	OFTEN	- How often was the roll taken?
2.	ACT	- Is any action other than contacting the parents taken to follow up inadequately explained absences?
3.	AGENCIES	- The number of different agencies contacted which deal with persistent non-attenders.
4.	RESOURCES	- Does the school have adequate resources to deal with persistent non-attenders?
5.	TIME	- How significant is the time spent on the administration of school non-attendance?

The items were all standardised prior to combining them into the index. The reliability of the index is presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Reliability of the School Action Index

	Intercorrelation of Variables					Alpha if Item Deleted
Variables:	1	2	3	4	5	
1. OFTEN	-	.13	.38	.30	.28	.68
2. ACT		-	.34	.28	.24	.70
3. AGENCIES			-	.45	.31	.61
4. RESOURCES				-	.46	.61
5. TIME					-	.65

Alpha of index = .70
Mean = -.06
Standard deviation = 3.36

Peer Group Attachment

This index was created from four items on the wave 3 longitudinal study questionnaire. The items were of the Likert-type requiring students to indicate the strength of their agreement of disagreement on 4-point scale with the following statements.

*	Item 1	My friends get good marks at school.
	Item 2	My friends always seem to be in trouble.
	Item 3	My friends have left school.
	Item 4	My friends in Year 9 and Year 10 used to wag school.

The items were combined into an additive scale the reliability of which is given in Table 8.

TABLE 8

Reliability of Peer Group Attachment Index

	Intercorrelation Matrix				Alpha if Item Deleted
Items	1	2	3	4	
1.	-	.28	.19	.14	.54
2.		-	.29	.33	.41
3.			-	.25	.49
4.				-	.49

Alpha of index = .56
Mean = 8.40
Standard deviation = 1.96